

## An Inconvenient Truth

### Summary

After the events in third year, the wizarding world grows darker. Fudge seems intent on spending more time covering up what's happening than dealing with it. Covers 4th year.

The story picks up at with the escape of Peter Pettigrew. The story examines the question, could a stronger relationship between Harry and the Bones family change history?

The major characters in this story include Harry, Susan/Amelia Bones, Pettigrew, Voldemort, Sr/Jr Crouch, Lucius Malfoy and Fudge. It illustrates a different set of scenes and PoVs than what JKR gave us in book 4. The divergence from her tale centers around the idea of Amelia Bones forming an active relationship with Harry immediately after Blacks capture/re-escape at the end of book three, rather than blindly relying on Dumbledore to watch over the-boy-who-lived.

Please note – Ron abandons Harry in book 4. My assumption in this story is that with a larger support base, Harry would be much less inclined to attempt to repair their torn friendship.

Rating – This story contains occasional elements of unpleasantness as well as aspects of a budding teenage relationship. In my mind, it has earned it's rating. The DEs in this story are, as a whole, quite an unsavory bunch.

Disclaimer - JKR's sandbox, not mine. I'm just having a blast pushing some of the piles around a bit and rearranging them.

Wizarding etiquette – This and most fanfiction stories are written strictly on a hobby basis. I make no claim that it is error free. Another volunteer has agreed to look it over once for me before I post it. If you enjoy my little stories and are willing to accept the quality level, please continue reading my story. If you can't accept the occasional typo or choose to nit-pick sentence structure based on new information that your parents just paid your college a lot of money to drill into you, please find a different story.

Please leave a review from time to time so I know that I'm not just talking to my steel horse.

Crow

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Story

Chapter One

The Accidental Eyeful

Thursday 9 June 1994

As Hermione Granger's screamed in horror while her defense professor turn into a werewolf, Peter Pettigrew saw his opportunity. He concentrated and transformed into the shape of a rat. As he did so, the ropes that had been conjured to restrain him while he was taken up to the castle slipped off, and he scurried into the high grass and out of sight.

Having been exposed as a murdering traitor, Pettigrew knew that he could no longer enjoy the comforts and company of his longtime role of a student's pet, and would need to quickly leave the area.

As Professor Remus Lupin mindlessly dashed into the Forbidden Forest to spend the night as a werewolf, Pettigrew felt a chill in the air as at least a hundred of the spirit demons known as dementors descended upon his childhood friend, Sirius Black. Since they were both wandless, the two escaped wizards had no way to defend themselves. Pettigrew scurried as fast as he could up into the relative safety of the castle.

While Harry Potter was conjuring an incredibly powerful Patronus charm, that would eventually save Black, Professor Severus Snape,

and Potter's two friends Hermione and Ron Weasley, Pettigrew reached the main entrance to the thousand-year-old castle.

Staying out of sight, Pettigrew scurried along the corridors of the castle until he reached the Gryffindor tower.

Minutes later, Severus Snape awoke from being stunned, and conjured ropes to bind Black, as Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, who had heard the disturbance outside, quickly made his way to the front doors and out onto the lawn. Hearing Snapes's version of the events, without comment from the unconscious students, Snape and Dumbledore conjured floating stretchers and transported Black and the students into the castle. At the door, they were met by Assistant Headmistress Minerva McGonagall, who volunteered to levitate the three students to the hospital wing for treatment.

Meanwhile, at the entrance to the Gryffindor dormitories, Head Boy Percy Weasley opened the door to make his evening rounds. He didn't notice the little rat scurry inside before the door closed.

Pettigrew knew that he would need to steal a wand and as much cash as he could quickly grab, and scurried up the wall, circumventing the charmed stairway into the girls' dormitory. No stranger to the girls' dormitory, Pettigrew silently transformed just inside Romilda Vane's curtained room, where he quietly pocketed her wand, and picked up her purse. Rummaging his way through it, he pocketed a handful of galleons and more importantly, a dozen currency notes that the young witch had kept throughout the year; given to her by her overly generous, well-meaning parents. Silently, Pettigrew made his way into a few other rooms, rummaged through purses for money, and pocketed a second girl's wand before slipping back downstairs.

Minutes later, Pettigrew opened the doorway, changed back into his rat form and made his way to the front entrance. By the time Harry and Hermione were flying Buckbeak the hippogriff up to the tall tower to rescue Black, Pettigrew was nearing the edge of the castle grounds, where he was able to apparate away.

Pettigrew knew that he could no longer hide amongst decent wizards. He had overheard talk that the spirit of his master, the Dark Lord Voldemort might be hiding out in the forests of Albania. Not being at all familiar with Albania, all he knew was that it was across the Adriatic Sea, a hundred miles east of the heel of Italy.

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Sunday 19 June

A week and a half later, department of magical law enforcement director Amelia Bones wore a concerned look on her face. Her grandniece, Susan had arrived home from Hogwarts for the summer last night after completing her third year, and Arthur Weasley had left her office ten minutes ago. She recalled the conversation with the red haired man as she ate her sandwich and crisps.

“They all saw him, Amelia. Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Remus Lupin – They all saw Pettigrew. They were in the Shrieking Shack and had somehow captured Pettigrew. Remus and... Harry confronted him. Unfortunately, Pettigrew changed back into his Animagus rat form as they were walking back to the castle, when Remus... due to his condition...”

Giving the kind-hearted man an indulging look, Bones admonished, “Arthur, I can’t possibly act on half-truths and missing facts. Where were Severus Snape and Sirius Black at the time?”

“Er... unconscious and nearby, I suppose.”

Skilled from a long career of interrogating witnesses, Bones, the director of magical law enforcement for wizarding Britain made a move to clean her monocle and asked, “What happened to Black?”

The balding red-head squirmed a bit in his chair and admitted, “Er, Ron didn’t know. Apparently, Snape regained consciousness at some point, stunned Black and brought them all back to the castle after the dementors went away.” Arthur would have liked to say more, but he really didn’t know the specifics.

Amelia nodded. By the time that Fudge had told anyone in the Auror department that Black had been captured, the escaped fugitive had escaped again, was long gone and a search of the grounds yielded nothing of value. After coming up empty handed, Fudge had finally relented to Dumbledore's wishes and agreed to send the foul dementors back to the Azkaban fortress miles out in the North Sea.

Amelia collected her thoughts again and recalled her final question. "Obviously Black's been in Azkaban for the last twelve years. Where do you suppose Pettigrew's been?"

Arthur fidgeted for a moment, looked down and replied, "Apparently he's been living at my home all these years. My son, Percy found him when he was five, took him in as a pet and he's either been at the Burrow or Hogwarts since."

What frustrated Amelia the most was that most of what she'd just been told was, at least officially, worthless. Arthur's career would be over if it came out that he'd been harboring a mass murderer in his home for a dozen years, detected or not. Guilty or not, Sirius Black was a fugitive, and without Pettigrew in custody, alive or dead, there was no possible testimony from a reliable witness that could shed favorable light on his case. No one would officially accept the word of a werewolf or underage wizards regarding a political hot potato like Black. Rubbing her forehead, she doubted that he'd quietly surrender, even if she could guarantee him the trial that he'd never received.

Arthur's words also pointed to the widening rift that she was sensing in the dotted line relationship that she had with the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. Her department hadn't even been informed that Black was in custody, or that he'd escaped minutes later, only that the dementors had left the castle. She hadn't heard a word about Pettigrew prior to Arthur mentioning it. Fudge had obviously bungled the job, and was attempting to cover it up.

What confused her most was the dementors' behavior. If Black was out in the open on the school grounds that night, they certainly would have sensed him, swarmed, and immediately sucked his soul out. What had driven them away? Lupin must have been in his werewolf form, and would have been unable to cast a patronus, and it was

doubtful that any of the students could have caused as much a wisp of silver vapor to appear, let alone in the presence of a dementor. What would possibly have caused a hundred or more to back away?

She decided to pay Potter a visit in a few days. Perhaps he could add some details that Arthur hadn't heard from his son.

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Meanwhile, in Mid Wales, Amelia's grand niece Susan Bones and her lifelong friend Hannah Abbott were in the pool at the Bones estate just outside Welshpool, in their bikinis, sunning themselves on their floaties. They were enjoying the first day of their summer holiday. Hannah and her parents lived on the southern coast, but wizarding floo travel all but eliminated the distance of 200 miles between their homes. As a result, the two teenaged witches had always been able to see each other every day. Like Susan's Aunt Amelia, they were still trying to determine what had happened on that evening, a few days before the leaving feast.

Hannah recounted the events as best as she recalled them. "Ernie was at greenhouse three with Megan doing research that night, and they saw a bright light shaped like a large animal chasing away a hundred or so dementors."

Susan gave her friend a little smirk. Ernie and Megan had been spending quite a few evenings out by the greenhouses "doing research" in the last few months. Putting aside the thoughts of the raging hormones of her fellow teens, she tried to recall any spells that would chase away dementors. She'd have to ask Auntie when she came home for dinner.

Paddling her floatie raft to the edge of the pool, Hannah continued. "Cindy Smith heard shouting by the hospital wing as she and Cedric were doing their patrol rounds. She told her brother Zach that it sounded like Professor Snape was ranting something about Sirius Black getting away, and blaming it on Potter."

Susan protested, "But Harry, Ron and Hermione were in the hospital wing for the night. I saw them get admitted when I was leaving after Madam Pomfrey gave me some pain-relieving potion about ten."

Hannah smiled at the speed that her friend Susan came to Potter's defense. Though Susan had yet to admit it, Hannah was positive that she liked him.

Susan had lived with her grand aunt as long as she could remember. Her parents had been killed just days before baby Harry defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in 1981. As a result of their similar circumstances, Susan had always felt like a kindred spirit with the Boy-Who-Lived, except that she'd always thought of him as little Harry Potter, fellow orphan, whom she hoped to become a good friend with someday. He had always been nice to her, saying hi and the like when he saw her in Herbology class, but he always seemed to be paired up with Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom or Hermione Granger. Silently, she hoped that she would have a better chance this next term.

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While Hannah and Susan were drying off, Pettigrew boarded the Bari Ferry in Italy that was headed to the Albanian port city of Durres. An older woman sitting next to him gave him a queer look as if she sensed something off about the man sitting next to her, but it could have simply been a total lack of proper hygiene on his part.

It had taken him the better part of two weeks to get this far, and Pettigrew calculated that his meager funds would feed him for another four or five days. He had never learned how to apparate to a place that he couldn't see or hadn't been to. As a result, he was forced to take busses or trains as he made his way through France and Italy. Compounding his problems, he had no passport and only spoke English. Looking at the map, he saw large forested areas by Godinje, Rostusa and Pestani. A few hours later, he got off of the ferry and made his way to Godinje to begin his search.

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As Pettigrew was getting off of the ferry, wealthy wizarding investor Lucius Malfoy was in London enjoying a fine dinner while coaching Fudge into taking a favorable position on various topics. Cornelius Fudge was many things, but no one would accuse him of being an inventive thinker or a visionary leader. Objectively, he had no leadership qualities whatsoever.

He was, however, a decent administrator, who frequently sought advice from those who he viewed as leaders, namely Albus Dumbledore and Lucius Malfoy. Both leaders kept him in office largely for that reason – they viewed him as pliable, or in Malfoy's case, payable.

Fudge preferred the company of Malfoy, and objectively, shared Malfoy's conservative viewpoints on blood status. What separated them was largely wealth. Malfoy was of old family money, whereas prior to his rise in office, Cornelius had been, financially, much closer in status to middle class families such as Amos Diggery than his current dinner companion.

Malfoy had become a benefactor of sorts to Fudge some twenty years prior, and either helped him by opening doors that would otherwise be closed to him, publicly aiding in projects or charities that would reflect well on the politician, or directly lining his pockets by regularly contributing to Fudge's largely unregulated "campaign fund."

Besides the money, Fudge greatly appreciated that his friend Lucius rarely directly asked for anything in return. As a result, Fudge was only too happy to have helped him out years back by publicly backing his claim that he and a handful of his like-minded associates must have been forced to do He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's bidding due to being under the effects of the Imperius curse. For several years afterwards, Malfoy had been only too happy to assist Fudge whenever requested, asking almost nothing in return.

Fudge was in a position to return a favor tonight, and commented, "Lucius, the Quidditch World Cup Final is coming up in a few weeks. I would be honored if you, your lovely wife Narcissa, and your son Draco would accompany me as my guests."



Malfoy, who had been expecting the invitation, and, having orchestrated the dinner to make it happen as an opportunity to meet the Bulgarian MoM, gave Fudge a sincere look as he replied, "We would be honored to accept, Minister." Malfoy wanted to meet the foreign leader to expand his sphere of influence, and felt that the casual atmosphere of the game would be a perfect opportunity to make it look like a chance meeting. They could chat for several hours in a perfectly innocent setting.

Malfoy had enjoyed the last dozen years. Free of the servitude that the Dark Lord required, his status and personal wealth skyrocketed. Like a mafia Don, the people who he did business with recognized that Malfoy was, at some level, a very dangerous man. As such, their business dealings were always balanced and Lucius frequently received discounts wherever he went. Over time the percentage point here and there tended to add up to serious money. It had been years since Malfoy had personally been involved in violence, but in his line of business, perception was frequently as good as reality.

Appearing thoughtful for a moment, Malfoy added, "Since there is always the possibility that some misguided troublemakers might take advantage of so many fine citizens and merchants being away, it would probably make sense to add extra Aurors on duty at Diagon Alley and St. Mungo's while the match is on, especially during the evening hours immediately following the event."

Fudge could see nothing wrong with the request and nodded in agreement. He replied, "That's a splendid idea, Lucius. I'll take care of it. Speaking of which, have you heard the news regarding Sirius Black?"

Malfoy felt like a gambler who had hit the jackpot. He had heard Snape's report via Draco, and was one of the few who knew of Pettigrew's true alliance, though he'd previously believed him to be dead. He replied, "Only the basics, Minister. I understand that Black was temporarily apprehended while supposedly in pursuit of a long-buried hero. I'm certain that his real objective was to harm Harry Potter." He gave another apparently thoughtful look and commented, "It's unfortunate that the dementors couldn't have done their jobs a

few minutes earlier, and made our world a safer place. There's been no word of Black's whereabouts since?"

Completely misinterpreting Malfoy's meaning, Fudge replied, "There's no need to worry your lovely wife, Lucius. I'm certain that the Aurors will find him and remove the threat of further despicable acts on his part within a matter of days."

Malfoy poured his dining companion more from the bottle of expensive single malt that was on the table. It was obvious to him that Pettigrew was alive and on the run. Black, apparently friendless, would be caught sooner or later. That would suit Lucius just fine, as he knew with certainty that Sirius Black had never been a Death Eater and had never been marked by the Dark Lord. Malfoy gave his head an involuntary shake at the idiotic notion that the Dark Lord had somehow forced his mark on anyone who had not demonstrated their absolute willingness to devote themselves to the pureblood cause. He still couldn't believe that the fools at the Ministry could so easily be sold the mistaken belief that so many of the captured Death Eaters had been forced into servitude and had simply been acting under the Imperius curse.

After a few minutes of silence, Fudge concluded that their business was over for the night, stood up and remarked, "Thank you for dinner, and I'll see you and your family at the World Cup."

Malfoy stood as well, and replied, "The pleasure was mine, Minister. My family and I look forward to your company. Please let me know how I may be of service to you next."

As Fudge put on his bowler hat, both men thought that they had gotten the better deal. Fudge had enjoyed a fine meal for free and received a good tip to keep his orderly world happy, while giving away some free tickets to a man that he was proud to be seen with. Malfoy had spent a handful of galleons on a dinner that he was going to enjoy anyway, and had cleared the way for a safe gathering of some old friends.

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Monday 20 June

Harry Potter's first days back from school hadn't involved floating in a pool. His uncle Vernon had sensed a new look of confidence on the face of the boy, and had decided that he needed to wipe it off before the boy grew defiant. After a few minutes of man-handling the boy in the back garden, he'd given him an impossibly large list of chores and maintenance tasks to be completed for the summer and had walked back into his sitting room, feeling quite proud of himself. Pouring himself a glass of Johnny Red, he sat down in his easy chair, obviously pleased that he'd nipped yet another problem in the bud.

The next day Harry woke up and noticed that there was an owl sitting on his windowsill and another owl – well really half of an owl, since it was so small, fluttering in his small bedroom. Exercising his seeker-honed reflexes, Harry gently grabbed the fluttering owlet out of the air and carefully untied the message that had been tied to the little fluff ball's leg. Unrolling it, he read:

Harry,

We all got home. This is just a test message to see if the little owl, Pig could really deliver a message.

Percy got a job at the Ministry. Big Headed Prick if you ask me.

More later. Try sending a short reply with Pig.

Ron

Harry's beautiful white owl, Hedwig looked at the little bird with a mixture of pity and scorn. No owl should behave so ungracefully, nor should they have to suffer such an undignified name. She turned her back on the little owl and gave her attention to the handsome great gray owl that was waiting patiently on the windowsill.

Harry picked up a pencil and dashed off a reply, then tied the message to the little owl's leg and sent it on its way. Harry looked at the great gray and he fluttered onto the desk next to him. He carefully untied the message, broke the seal, and unrolled the parchment.

Dear Mr. Potter

I would like to talk with you regarding the events of 9 June that took place on the Hogwarts grounds and in the Shrieking Shack.

As this is not an official deposition, it is my belief that you would be more comfortable having this conversation someplace other than at my office at the Ministry.

Additionally it is my understanding that your uncle's home is not currently attached to the floo network. As such, I would like to invite you to my home for dinner tonight. I will pick you up this afternoon at 4:30 and have you home again by 10 PM.

If this is acceptable, please use a quill and write yes on the parchment. If another time or date would be better, please indicate it.

I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Amelia Bones

Director DMLE

Harry was understandably nervous as he reread the parchment and put it back on the desk. Obviously he had broken some laws when he and Hermione had helped Sirius escape. No one else knew that she had been involved, and Harry resolved not to bring up her name if at all possible. He found a quill and some ink and wrote yes on the paper.

As he did so, the great gray gave Hedwig one last look, and flew out of the open window.

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Barty Crouch Jr sat on the chair in his bedroom staring at the wall as he'd been commanded to. He had been in his room for several weeks

now, ever since that woman, Ms. Jorkins came to the house unexpectedly and saw him sitting on the sofa.

From time to time, the pleasant feeling faded somewhat, and other thoughts crept into his consciousness. This usually happened on the few occasions when he and his minder, house elf Winky would go out in the back garden.

He continued staring at the wall.

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A few hours later, Petunia Dursley opened the door and was immediately intimidated by the woman that was standing at her doorstep. Approximately seventy, but looking younger and exceptionally alert, the older woman carried herself with an ease that a large company executive would have. Petunia became nervous when she noticed that the woman at her door had taken in dozens of details about her home in the few seconds that the door had been open. She inquired, "May I help you?"

The older woman spoke with level of confidence that Petunia had not heard in a woman before. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Dursley. My name is Amelia Bones. I'm here to pick up your nephew, Harry. He is expecting me. I will have him home by ten PM." There was no hint of asking permission in her voice. It was simply a statement of fact.

Amelia looked around the immaculate living room as she stepped into the Dursley home. The fireplace was blocked off, and there were a dozen studio family photographs on the fireplace mantle and on the walls. Taken through the years, each of them pictured a family of three; adding weight to her friend Poppy Pomfrey's claim that, at best, Harry was neglected while living with his relatives.

"I'll get the boy," remarked Petunia.

Dudley heard her from the top of the stairs where he'd been listening and yelled, "Hey freak, get down the stairs. Someone's at the door!"

Amelia gave the now visibly nervous woman a look that clearly indicated that she wasn't impressed.

A moment later, she saw Harry at the top of the stairs, wearing his white school shirt and black trousers. She hadn't specified that they were casual at her home. She noticed that his trainers had recently been cleaned, but were in horrible condition. They obviously were the best that he had. She smiled at him and in a cheerful voice greeted, "Good afternoon, Harry. Are you ready to go?"

As he came down the stairs, he replied, "Yes, Ma'am."

Amelia glanced at Petunia and just barely above a whisper stated, "There'll be some changes when I come back tomorrow morning to see you."

Recalling the pig tail that had been placed on her Dudders several years ago, Petunia nodded in resignation.

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Bartemius Crouch Senior sat in his sitting room chair recalling the last time that he saw his wife alive. He rued the day that he had made the vow to Nancy that he would break their son Bartemius Jr. out of Azkaban, where he along with three others were serving life sentences for brutally torturing Frank and Alice Longbottom.

Nancy had believed that Barty Jr. had simply been misguided, and as she was terminally ill, had been able to talk her husband into having her switch places with their son in prison. Due to his position at the Ministry and her illness, they had been allowed an unsupervised visit with Junior in prison. While there, both Nancy and Barty Jr. took a dose of polyjuice potion so they took on each others' appearance.

Minutes later both Bartys left the island prison, and Nancy died a few days later, still looking like her son. Senior threw his empty glass of single malt into the fireplace, smashing the crystal glass, disgusted that he hadn't even given his wife of nearly thirty years a decent burial.

Winky ran into the room as fast as her little house elf legs would carry her, and immediately cleaned up the mess. Crouch paid no attention to the servant. He recalled with disgust that Junior hadn't just been misguided, rather he was a true believer. Lacking the courage to murder his own son, and unable to simply return him to prison, Senior had cast the first of many years worth of Imperius curses on Junior in order to contain him in an unofficial, unauthorized house-arrest.

Winky the house elf had been given the responsibility for Junior's day-to-day care. He was kept locked in his bedroom for many hours at a time, or was allowed to be in the sitting room if under a poor quality invisibility cloak, as Senior didn't want to see him. This had gone on for nearly a dozen years when Winky had begged her master to allow Junior to go out and attend the Quidditch World cup as a long-promised favor to his deceased wife.

The logistical nightmare of keeping such a promise was solved when Fudge gave Crouch a pair of tickets in the private top viewing box. Senior would demand that Junior sit in the back corner seat with Winky seated right next to him, to keep an eye on Junior and keep anyone from accidentally bumping into him. He would take them up two hours early and she could bring him down after the match was over and the crowds had gone. He gave her strict instructions not to let Junior out of her sight and retired for the evening.

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Amelia and Harry walked around the house to the Dursley's back garden and Amelia asked, "Harry, have you ever apparated with anyone before?"

In a very polite voice, Harry replied, "No Ma'am."

Expecting his response, she held onto his bicep and directed, "Please hold onto my arm, about this tight. Don't let go until I ask you to."

"Yes Ma'am"... Pop!

After a moment, they reappeared just to the left of her fireplace hearth. Looking over at Harry, he seemed surprisingly steady on his

feet. She sensed that he would have a very easy time learning this mode of magical transportation. Pointing to her kitchen table, she suggested, "Let go Harry and please have a seat. Would you like some biscuits and butterbeer or some tea?"

The skinny teen replied, "Butterbeer, please, if it isn't too much trouble. Thank you."

Amelia's house elf, Smidgen was there in an instant, and within seconds they both had been served.

She let him have a few minutes to get settled in, and then suggested, "Harry, I'd like you to tell me what happened that night and what you think it means. I'm not trying to get you or your friends in trouble, just understand what happened. I'll try not to interrupt you, so I might take a note from time to time to ask a question when you've finished. Is that okay?"

Harry glanced at the steely-eyed woman who exuded confidence, even though it was evident that she also had a softer side. He thought for a moment, found that he believed her, nodded, and began; "Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger and I went down to visit Hagrid before Buckbeak the hippogriff was to be executed. While we were visiting him, Ron found his pet rat, Scabbers that had run away about a week earlier."

He looked at Director Bones who nodded for him to continue. "Fudge and Macnair were coming, so Hagrid sent us out of his back door. We started going back to the castle, when Ron's rat went nutters and tried to get away. Ron managed to get the rat back into his cloak pocket when this huge dog came up and grabbed him and dragged him to the tunnel that leads to the Shrieking Shack. We didn't have a clue why that was happening, but Hermione and I ran after him."

Harry stopped for a moment to collect himself. Amelia was pretty sure that the teen was deciding how much to tell her, and she looked at him encouragingly.

"We found the tunnel and followed him until we got inside the Shrieking Shack. We looked around and it was apparent that he'd



been dragged upstairs. When we got upstairs, and opened the door, Ron gave us a terrified look and Sirius Black was behind us. I reached out and grabbed him and had my wand on him, when Professor Lupin came in. He'd figured it out and took all of our wands, so we wouldn't kill him."

Harry took another pull on his butterbeer bottle. It was obviously a difficult story for him to relate, but Amelia felt that she had to hear it without coaching him. She'd eventually ask for a pensieve memory of the night, but wanted to use this opportunity to help them build a relationship of sorts.

"To make a long story short, the rat was Peter Pettigrew in an animagus form. Sirius had recognized him from a picture in the newspaper of the Weasleys on holiday in Egypt. Professor Lupin and Black talked with him and he confessed to giving up my mum and dad to Voldemort. When Sirius caught up with him a few days later on that street, Pettigrew cut his finger off, yelled out loud that Sirius was the traitor, and blew a hole in the street with his wand behind his back. I reckon that was what killed those people. Anyway, Sirius saw him change into his rat form and disappear. As I understand it, he got landed in Azkaban without so much as a trial."

Amelia was tempted to say something, but she restrained herself, and sipped her tea in silence. She was certain that everything that Harry had told her was the truth, at least as he believed it, but she was fairly certain that there was more to the story. She looked at him and knew that he was feeling stressed as he was talking with her. Something told her that he was mentally strong and could keep going.

After he set his empty butterbeer down, he continued. "Snape had found us in the shack, but he hadn't seen Pettigrew. He was going to take Sirius to the dementors to get his soul... to get kissed, but I knocked him unconscious when I disarmed him. Anyway, on the way back to the castle, while we were in the tunnel, Sirius told me that he was my godfather, and told me that I could come live with him when he got his name cleared. I was so happy. It would be so much better than living with my...would have been, anyway."

Amelia could feel the pain rolling off of the teen. She hoped in some way his telling the story would be therapeutic. She had a dark feeling that his life with the Dursleys was so much less than it should be. Smidgen the little Bones family elf handed Harry another butterbeer, and another plate of biscuits and he continued.

“When we got out of the tunnel, we took a few steps and Hermione realized that it was the full moon. Professor Lupin began changing into a werewolf, and Sirius tried to protect us. They both ran off and Pettigrew slipped out of his ropes and got away.”

She noted that Harry hadn't yet mentioned that Black was also an animagus, but didn't say anything. She let the teen continue with his story.

“We couldn't find Pettigrew in the dark and heard Sirius cry out for help. Hermione and I ran towards him, but just about the time that we reached him, a hundred or so dementors began swooping down at us. I tried casting my patronus form, but it wasn't working properly. We must have passed out. When we regained consciousness, we were in the hospital wing, and we heard Fudge arguing with Professor Dumbledore. We tried to explain to Fudge that Sirius was innocent, but he wouldn't hear a word. He left to go get the dementors.”

Amelia was so disappointed with Fudge. As Minister of Magic, his primary job was to develop the budget that funded the different departments. In the last few years, he'd insisted on cutting the Aurors headcount, and transferred the funding to International Magical Cooperation, personal assistants and the Improper Use of Magic department which seemed to have a fixation on reporting minor spellwork done by school age muggleborn witches and wizards. He had justified his actions as proper peacetime administration, but she knew that Aurors were made and developed over time and couldn't suddenly be purchased at a moment of need. She wondered about those who were pulling on his strings.

Harry paused for a minute. He was visibly upset, but hadn't finished his story. She sipped her tea in silence until he began again.

"Professor Dumbledore came back in a minute later and suggested that we needed more time to make things right."

Amelia caught on immediately. The Granger girl must have had access to a time turner to take all of the classes that Susie had mentioned that she'd been enrolled in. She prodded, "What happened, Harry?"

The distraught teen replied, "Hermione and I went back three hours in time. We rescued Buckbeak from getting beheaded for no reason, and hid until we came out of the tunnel again. We waited for help across the bay and when the dementors came, I realized that I hadn't seen my dad rescue us; I'd seen myself. I cast my best patronus and it leapt across the bay and chased all of the dementors away."

Amelia was astounded at his tale. She doubted that there was anyone in the Auror corps that could cast a patronus and have it hold up against a dozen dementors, let alone chase away over a hundred. Yet there was no hint of exaggeration in his voice. He was simply a distressed teen, relating a story that he'd lived through.

Potter finished his story. "We waited until Snape came to and had tied Sirius up again. Then he took everyone back to the castle. Fudge came in a few minutes later and left after that to go get the dementors. After he left the castle, Hermione and I flew on Buckbeak up to the window where he was, unlocked it, and helped Sirius get away."

Amelia rubbed her forehead as she thought through what she'd just been told. There was no doubt that Potter, the Granger girl and Dumbledore had broken or disregarded a handful of laws that night. Yet there was no doubt in her mind that they had done the world a tremendous service. So very much was wrong with this entire situation - An innocent pureblood head of house had been imprisoned without so much as a trial. Pettigrew was alive, apparently guilty of a dozen murders and was on the run. Crouch had completely circumvented the justice system, probably at someone's suggestion. Only a few weeks after Black had been imprisoned, Crouch's son was arrested with Bellatrix, her husband and brother-in-law, captured while they were in the act of torturing the Longbottoms. The more she thought about it, the more it smelled like layers of cover-up heaped

upon each other, fueled by gold and the need for elected officials to appear to look good. Why had Crouch and Bagnold allowed this to happen? Why had he resigned from office so suddenly? Why had Fudge of all people been elected Minister?

Amelia sipped the rest of her tea as she recalled that Crouch's wife had fallen ill and passed away a few days after they visited their son Barty Jr. in Azkaban. Junior had unexpectedly died shortly after that, and Crouch Senior transferred in disgrace, to the Department of International Magical Co-operation - Bagnold's last action before leaving office. The Wizengamot had confirmed her promotion to Crouch's old position the next day, and the rest was history.

After a moment, she recalled her current circumstances, and looked over to see a silently sobbing teen. She got up, hugged the boy and acknowledged, "Thank you, Harry. Let's get you cleaned up." She led him upstairs and suggested, "The bathroom is the second door on the right. Take your time." She walked back down to the kitchen to review her notes and talk with Smidgen about dinner.

... --- ...

Amelia hadn't heard the girls come in while she was upstairs with Harry. Hannah had taken the floo home, and Susan dashed upstairs to change while Amelia was in the kitchen.

Susan walked into her bedroom, peeled off her wet suit and grabbed the top and shorts that were lying on her bed before walking into the bathroom to shower. She was holding her wet suit in one hand and her dry clothing in the other as she walked into the bathroom. As she closed the door, she was shocked to see Harry Potter sitting on the tile floor with his back against the ceramic, quietly sobbing!

It took Susan a few seconds to realize that a boy that she very much wanted to be friends with was in her home, crying his eyes out on her bathroom floor. It took her a few more seconds to recall that she had dashed from her bedroom to the bathroom to shower. It took her one last second to realize that she was quite naked.

"EEEEEP!"

Harry came out of his self induced trance to see a very naked, very healthy Susan Bones make some sort of gurgling noise and dash out of the bathroom. She must have tossed her clothing into the air when she left, because when Harry blinked again, there was a woman's bra draped over his head.

As the door slammed down the hallway, Harry couldn't help but notice that to his nearly fourteen year old eyes, it was... very interesting looking.

Realizing that he must have caused the girl extreme embarrassment, he got up off of the floor, ran cold water over his face, dried it off and walked down the stairs. He wondered how much trouble he was in, and hoped that Hermione wouldn't be arrested too.

Harry walked back into the kitchen, and sat down back at the kitchen table. Amelia asked him if everything was all right.

Harry replied, "I'm fine. You might want to go up and check on Susan though. She kind of walked in when..."

Knowing her niece's habits after getting out of the pool, Amelia envisioned what the profoundly embarrassed teen was attempting to mumble. She squeezed his shoulder and replied, "Have another butterbeer, Harry. Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes or so."

... --- ...

Susan Bones had no idea what to do. She muttered to herself, "Smooth move, Bones. Way to get Potter to notice... Oh, Merlin! Now what?"

She'd heard her Auntie mention that she was having Harry Potter over for dinner this week, but hadn't heard the day. Her hair was a mess, she needed a shower, she... Crap.

"Suzie? Are you in there?"

“Yes, Auntie.”

“Harry Potter’s over for dinner. He’s downstairs with Smidgen. Get showered and dressed, please. We’ll eat in twenty minutes. I’ll help you with your hair when you get out.”

Twenty minutes!!!

Susan threw open the door and dashed into the shower, passing her amused grand aunt in the hallway

Five minutes later she ran back into her room, wrapped in a towel. Amelia gave her a sympathetic look as she drew her wand and dried off the teen’s hair. In barely more than a whisper, she looked at her niece and said, “Don’t worry about the bathroom, dear. He’s had a very hard day, and needed a bit of cheering.”

A bit of cheering!?! “Auntie, he saw me naked!” Susan gasped, horrified that her aunt was making light of such a disaster.

“And he enjoyed it, I’m sure,” Amelia smiled.

“Auntieeeeeeeee!” her niece moaned, covering her face with her hands.

“Now sweetheart, I’m positive he doesn’t think any the less of you,” Amelia continued reassuringly. “Do you know what he said about it? He suggested I go and check on you because he was concerned about how embarrassed you’d be.”

“Really?” Susan whispered, peeking out through her fingers before slowly pulling them away. “He didn’t make fun of me or ... anything?”

“No,” Amelia replied, fighting back a smile. “Now finish getting dressed and come downstairs.”

Susan’s horrified expression returned. “I can’t face him now! Not after he saw ... everything! It’d be so embarrassing!”

"Well, you're going to have to see him sometime, Susan," Amelia explained, "and it'll be even more awkward if he knows you're avoiding him. You need to pull yourself together, gather up your courage and make the best of it." Susan gave her grand aunt a doubtful look, as her timid side reminded her that she was a Hufflepuff, not a Gryffindor. Realizing this, Amelia switched tactics. "Besides," she pointed out, "think how guilty he'd feel if you stayed in your room."

"I suppose," Susan admitted reluctantly, not wanting to cause Harry any additional consternation. Then she recalled what her grand aunt had said earlier about the boy needing cheering up, and remembered that he had been crying when she'd encountered him in the bathroom. "You said he'd had a very bad day," she noted, concern now overcoming her embarrassment. "Is he all right?"

Amelia admitted, "He told me about what happened that night with Sirius Black and the dementors. It was very stressful for him, but it's really his story to tell. Finish getting dressed, Susie and let's have a nice dinner with him." She gave her grand niece a squeeze on the shoulder and closed the door behind her as she walked back down the stairs. In spite of the fifty-six years that separated them, she really felt close to the teen.

... --- ...

While Harry was pondering female anatomy, Lucius Malfoy was having a drink with Stephen Nott. The two "old friends" agreed to meet two hours after the Quidditch Cup match ended, or at three AM, whichever was later. As he drained his glass of single malt Lucius remarked, "It will be time to show the Ministry that there are still those that remember the old ways."

Nott asked, "Won't the grounds be crawling with Aurors?"

Malfoy replied, "They'll be scared witless, like they always were. We'll have about five minutes before there is any sort of organized resistance. I expect that most of the Aurors will either be asleep in their tents, or dutifully guarding Diagon alley. Hundreds of wizards will

be reminded that there are those who know the difference between a pureblood and a mudblood.”

Nott smirked and replied, “I’ll tell the others.”

... --- ...

Susan finally came down the stairs and into the kitchen. She saw Harry there and before she thought about it, greeted him, “Hi, Harry. Why the school clothes?”

Once Susie mentioned it, Amelia guessed immediately and covered for Harry, saying, “We had a bit of official business to go over while you and Hannah were still outside.” Based on the condition of his oft-repaired shoes, his relatives obviously weren’t meeting his basic needs. Didn’t Harry know that he was from an old money family? He’d evidently worn the best clothing that he owned. Why had Susie stuck her foot in her mouth when she so obviously liked the boy?

Just then, Amelia heard Hannah calling through the fireplace and remarked, “You should tell her that you’ll call her back in the morning, dear.”

Susan, nodded and replied, “I’ll be right back, sorry.”

When Susan was out of the room, Amelia asked in a quiet voice, “Would you allow me to take you to Diagon Alley tomorrow morning, Harry? Perhaps you should visit Gringotts and you might wish to engage in a bit of shopping at the same time. I could help you pick a few things out, if you’d like.”

Harry looked at the kindly old woman with grateful eyes and replied, “That would be fantastic. Thank you, Ms. Bones.”

She smiled back at the teen, and remarked, “I believe that we can be on a first name basis if you’d like, Harry. Amelia, okay?”

Harry replied, “Yes, Ma’am... Amelia, Ma’am... Amelia.”



Amelia smiled, and replied, "Heaven's Harry, you can say He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's name as if it's nothing. Am I that scary?"

Harry replied, "No...Amelia, and his name isn't Voldemort, it's Tom Riddle."

Dumbstruck, she admitted, "There aren't many people alive who've made that connection. How did you know?"

Just then, Susan came back and announced, "Hannah and I are going to Diagon Alley tomorrow for lunch, then I'll be over there for the afternoon." Harry's presence gave her an idea, and despite still battling her nerves she asked, "Harry, would you like to have lunch with us tomorrow?"

Harry squirmed in his chair a bit and let out an "Err.. um," when Amelia saved him again, replying, "Harry doesn't have quite the same accessibility to the floo system, dear. Actually, he and I have a spot of business to work through in the morning, but I'm certain that we'd be done by noon. Where did you have in mind?"

"The Hollow Quill."

"Okay. Harry, I'll pick you up at nine."

Smidgen had made a fantastic dinner, though Amelia was surprised at how little Harry ate. It was as if he had purposely selected the smallest portions of each item served.

On the positive side, as the dinner wore on, Amelia noticed that Susan and Harry seemed to get over their awkwardness around each other.

After they were done with dessert, and Amelia refused Harry's offer to do the dishes for the third time, Susan asked, "Harry would you like to come out and see the back garden?"

Amelia smiled a bit and told Susan to have him back in an hour so she could get him home on time since she'd promised his aunt.

When they got outside, Susan remarked, "Harry, I'm sorry about barging in the bathroom this afternoon. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Before he thought about what he was saying, Harry replied, "I didn't mind, er, I mean...you're really quite beautiful, oh Lord."

Susan blushed at his words, smiled, gave his hand a squeeze and said, "I'll be sure to knock next time, Mr. Potter." She didn't press him for details about Black or the dementors. She showed him the pool and suggested, "Maybe you'd like to come over sometime for a swim?"

Harry looked down and replied, "I don't swim, er, I've never been, but it sounds like fun."

The strawberry blonde gave him a warm smile and offered. "I'd be happy to teach you. You never know when knowing how might come in handy."

Harry smiled at the thought.

The hour passed amazingly quickly, and before Harry knew it Susan was saying, "We'd better go back now. Auntie will be waiting." Harry nodded and they walked back to the house. She opened the back door and announced, "Right on time."

Amelia smiled as she recalled Susan's habit of getting home mere seconds before a stated deadline. She walked out the door and mentioned to her grandniece, "I'll be home in twenty minutes."

Susan nodded, looked at Harry encouragingly and said, "See you tomorrow, Harry."

Harry replied, "See ya."

Amelia took Harry's arm in hand and asked, "Are you ready to try apparition again?"

Harry nodded, and replied, "Yes, thanks."

He held her arm and a few seconds later they were in the Dursley's back garden. She was fairly certain that if he thought about it enough, he could probably apparate by himself within an hour.

Harry was going to walk back towards the house, when Amelia held his arm for a moment and cautioned him, "Harry, you and your friend broke at least a few laws that night. I'm not saying that you didn't do it for the right reason, but if you're caught again, not everyone will see it that way. Regardless of what you believe, Sirius Black is still a fugitive and Peter Pettigrew is a desperate and highly dangerous wizard on the run. Let me just ask this, if something comes up again, will you send me an owl or better yet, call if you can?" She handed him her Ministry business card, and added, "I have a mobile telephone that will work from most places. Don't hesitate to call me. I'm not too busy and I won't judge your actions. I'll just try and help you. Okay?"

Harry nodded, and replied, "Okay. Thanks again for dinner..." He wasn't quite comfortable calling her by her first name yet.

She added, "I'll be back tomorrow at nine. If your aunt or uncle objects to your being gone tomorrow, ask them to ring me. I'd be delighted to have a few words with them."

Harry nodded, and promised, "I will. Goodnight."

She smiled at him and replied, "Goodnight, Harry." A moment later she was gone.

When Harry walked inside, Petunia asked, "Harry, who is that woman?"

Harry replied, "Her name is Amelia Bones. She's the head of the magical law enforcement division. She wants to ask me more questions about my godfather, Sirius Black."

Petunia gave a startled look and asked, "Sirius Black, the mass-murderer?"

In an even voice Harry replied, "I don't know how many people he's killed, but I reckon if he goes after anyone else, they'll deserve it." He gave his aunt a smile and she shuddered.

Harry added, "She wants to see me again tomorrow morning."

Petunia was about to object, but thought better of it. Their chief of police wouldn't be bothering with the boy if there wasn't a good reason. Maybe he'd end up as a ward of their court system. Vernon would like that even if it meant putting off doing some long-needed repairs around the house. Potter could always do extra chores the next day.

Harry went to bed and slept peacefully; dreams filled with slightly naughty thoughts of a strawberry blonde.

.... --- ...

While Harry slept, Pettigrew wandered aimlessly through the forest near Gadinje in Albania. Most of the time he plodded north and south as he worked his way through the thick forest, but he sensed nothing that resembled his master. So far, the only reward for his searches had been hundreds of bug bites and too little bad food.

Oc-OC-oc

As the old scribe began his journey to the castle, he pondered the other scribes for a few minutes. He worried greatly about his friend Mike and wished him the very best.

The steel horse sprang to life and Crow felt the excitement that comes with starting a new report. He was delighted to be in contact with his fellow scribe Chem Prof and more than grateful for the help that the old professor and his bride had provided. Hopefully McGonagall would be as happy to hear from him again, as they hadn't parted on the best of terms after the conclusion of his last report.

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## Chapter Two

Moody

Wednesday 22 June

Pop. As promised, Amelia arrived at nine the next morning. Harry was in the back garden with his aunt providing him with a comparatively short list of chores that needed to be done before dinner. She caught the tail end of the conversation and asked, "What chores does the other boy have assigned today, Mrs. Dursley?" She liked the woman less and less with each encounter.

"Dudders is having tea with some of his classmates, not that it's any business of yours, Madam."

Amelia smiled at the bony woman and inquired, "And what chores need to be done today to provide you and your husband your pound of flesh?" She hated people that took out their anger or abused their positions by bullying those who were weaker.

Feeling more sure of herself than she should have, Petunia replied, "The garden needs trimming and the flowerbeds need weeding. When they are done properly, I suppose he can accompany you on your errands."

Amelia made a show of drawing her wand, and giving it a larger than needed wave, trimmed the yard and weeded the garden in just a few seconds. In a voice that contained just a hint on menace, she inquired, "Would you like me to cut anything else today, or may we be on our way?"

Petunia stuttered, "No, nothing else, thank you."

Amelia replied, "The next time I meet with your nephew, I will expect to hear that your son has done at least as many chores around the house as what you choose to ask of Harry. I'm certain that he'll be wearing better clothing as well, be calling his friends on the telephone when he chooses to, and have his choice of dessert from time to time. Wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Dursley, or should I have this same

conversation with your husband at his office at Grunnings this afternoon?"

Petunia squeaked, "I'll gladly take care of it today. Thank you for pointing these things out to me."

Amelia replied, "Good. I'm glad that we came to this understanding. I'm not a witch who enjoys being disappointed. Harry will be back before dinner. He may have places to visit several times a week during the remainder of the holiday. Will that be a problem?"

Practically shaking, Petunia replied, "None what-so-ever. Enjoy your day."

Harry watched the exchange between Director Bones and Aunt Petunia with a sense of extreme gratitude. He had never had another adult, yet alone one in authority, stand up to his relatives before. He'd never asked for much, but now that he was older, he'd come to realize that a few guiding words years ago could have reigned in his uncles and cousin's constant bullying behavior. After a minute, it looked like the conversation between them had come to a close and Harry brushed the dirt off of his trousers from the flowerbeds.

Amelia saw Harry doing his best to make himself presentable and asked, "Are you ready to go to Diagon Alley? If you don't have it with you, please go get your wand."

Harry replied, "I'll be right back. It's in my room."

Amelia replied, "If you don't mind, I'll come with you to find it."

They walked into the house, leaving Petunia standing in her back garden. Amelia noticed that it was an average size two story home, well appointed and if nothing else, spotless inside. Her mood darkened when she concluded who had likely kept it so clean. As she'd noticed before, there was no outward acknowledgement of Harry's existence anywhere on the main floor - no photographs of him, none of his parents, nothing. They walked up the stairway to the room at the end of the hallway on the right. She noticed that the door had several sliding locks in the outside and had been fitted with a cat flap

at the bottom. Stepping inside she looked in disgust at the poor furnishings. They were obviously cast-offs that Vernon had found either at a thrift shop, or on the street, tossed out from some hot-sheet motel. She looked in the wooden crate that served as Harry's clothing closet. In place of a bar hung a strand of cracked lamp wire. There were two impossibly large sweatshirts, one with a rude slogan on the back, a spare pair of dungarees that would be better fitted for a sumo wrestler, two pair of underpants and three pair of stockings. Seeing as there was no chest of drawers in the tiny room, she concluded that she was looking at the sum of his non-wizarding possessions. This space wasn't even meant to be a bedroom. It was intended to be either a large closet, or a very small sewing room that happened to have a window. She noticed a beautiful white owl in a recently cleaned, unlocked cage giving her a reproachful look.

She watched as Harry opened his trunk. On one side were several neatly folded white shirts, a pair of black trousers, and the school robes. On the other side were neatly stacked textbooks. Harry picked up his wand, closed his trunk and announced, "I'm ready. Will I need anything else?"

"Just your vault key, if you have it?"

Harry bent down and pulled up a floorboard from under his little bed. He reached down and fished out a small brass key, then replaced the board.

They walked down the hallway back to the stairs. Each of the other three rooms were well appointed with matching carpet and curtains, a queen bed, closets and sitting chairs. Unsurprisingly, the other boy's room was a disaster - littered with computer games, an unmade bed, four pair of expensive athletic shoes scattered on the floor, and posters of indecently dressed young women taped on the walls.

As they walked back down the stairs and along the hallway back to the kitchen, Amelia noticed a cupboard door with sliding latches and a lock similar to what she'd seen outside Harry's bedroom door. She opened it and noticed an old crib mattress on the floor. Closing the door, she noticed Harry's embarrassed look and gently inquired, "How long?"

Harry replied, "Nearly ten years. Actually they moved me up there just after I got my Hogwarts letters, addressed to the cupboard under the stairs."

"Letters?"

Harry smiled as he recalled the chaos that they'd caused, disrupting the Dursley's orderly lives. He replied, "I must have received hundreds of them. My uncle kept binning them until Hagrid came and put one in my hand and broke Uncle Vernon's shotgun."

"You certainly have more than your share of interesting adventures. I want to hear more of them, but we should get going." He followed her out to the front yard, and they walked a half-mile or so. Amelia inquired, "Have you ever taken the Knight Bus?"

Harry nodded and joked, "Actually yes; one time by accident."

Amelia smiled and commented, "That's probably another interesting adventure that I'd like to hear about sometime. For now, though, please call the bus."

Harry held out his wand, and a few seconds later, heard a crack as the violently purple bus appeared. Stan Shunpike got out and began his boilerplate pitch – "Welcome to the Knight Bus..." He looked up and greeted them, "Hello Neville. Blimey, it's Director..."

Amelia cut him off, and in a low voice said, "That will do, Mr. Shunpike. We don't wish to be announced. This is Harry Potter, not Neville Longbottom. Mr. Potter will be taking the bus from time to time over the next few weeks. I would appreciate it if you wouldn't announce his presence, or mention his use of the bus to anyone, now or ever. Further, I would expect that he wouldn't be kept on the bus any longer than necessary. Can you manage that for him?"

The gobstruck young man replied, "No Problem, Ma'am. Is it, Ern? We won't breathe a word. Harry Potter, eh?"



She gave him an annoyed look that McGonagall would have envied and replied, "Good. It's settled then. Now, how much is our fare to Diagon Alley?"

"Seven sickles each. That's fourteen sickles together. Twenty if you'd..."

Amelia smiled indulgently and commented, "We don't need cocoa or a toothbrush today, but thank you. Can we be on our way?"

"Right then. Find a seat and we'll be leaving straightaway."

No sooner had they sat down than the bus gave a violent lurch and the road became a blur. In less than five minutes, the bus came to a stop and Stan announced, "Anyone oo wants to get out at Diagon Alley, now's the time, 'cause we're here."

She looked around as the bus left and they walked across the road and opened the door into the Leaky Cauldron.

... --- ...

Rita Skeeter was certain that she hadn't deserved the dressing down that her editor had given her when she'd reported that Sirius Black had been captured and had escaped from Hogwarts. Her source, Severus Snape had personally apprehended Black, though even she dismissed his claim that the Boy-Who-Lived had been the one who had somehow set the dangerous madman free.

She didn't notice the older woman and the dark haired teen pass silently through the dark pub, barely nodding to the innkeeper as they closed the back door behind them. She smiled as the ancient barkeep handed her another gin and tonic.

... --- ...

Amelia was relieved that Skeeter hadn't noticed them as they passed through the pub that served as a gateway into the Diagon Alley shopping district of London. They walked at a fairly quick pace until the reached the white marble steps of Gringotts bank. They walked to

the counter of the dimly lit building where a long row of tellers were working at their various tasks. When it was their turn to talk with the dispatching goblin that would direct them to the right spot, the dispatcher, who had a long nose, even by goblin standards inquired, "What may we do for you today, Madam Bones and Mr. Potter?"

Amelia replied, "Four things, Longsnout - Harry will need to visit his trust vault this morning. When we return from it, I would like to have him receive a copy of his parents' Will, and I would like for Harry to receive an account listing of his family vault. Finally, he will want to exchange some galleons for pound sterling notes. He'll want two thousand, sterling."

The goblin nodded, appreciating the efficiency of the request and replied, "Fangtooth will be happy to escort you. Please follow him."

Harry gave Amelia a questioning look and asked, "How did you know about those things?"

Amelia replied, "That's a fair question, Harry. My brother's son Edgar, was a friend of your parents, along with Frank Longbottom. They were in the Auror academy together. Edgar and his wife, Rachel were Susan's parents. They were killed a few days before your parents. I believe that you will find their names, along with Frank and Alice Longbottom somewhere in your parents' succession list of possible guardians for you."

Harry made the connection, and replied, "Neville's parents? What happened to them?"

Amelia explained as they rode the cart through the winding and mostly dark tunnels. Finally the cart stopped and Fangtooth announced, "We're at your vault, Mr. Potter. Key please."

Harry handed the gnarled goblin his key and they got out of the cart and opened the door. Harry reached in and picked up a stack of fifty coins, one of approximately a thousand such stacks in his vault. Amelia prodded him suggesting, "Why don't you take out nine or ten more Harry. You need to get a few things, and having a bit of spending money would never hurt."

Harry picked up a total of ten stacks and placed them in the little bag the Fangtooth had provided. They got back in the cart, and Amelia added, "Harry, your parents were quite well off. They must have set up that trust vault for you when you were born, intending to add to it as you got into school. They wanted you to be able to buy anything that you needed, regardless of what might happen to them. Let's take a look at your parents' will and exchange half of your coins for some muggle notes. The estate summary that you just received won't change anything for you this year, but I was fairly certain that you've never been given one before."

Harry replied, "Never. I didn't even know that they had another vault or anything other than the one that Hagrid had shown me when he found me."

They arrived at the lobby end of the cart ride and Fangtooth led them to a small conference room where there were two documents on the table and six chairs. He asked, "Would you care to examine the documents while I exchange your galleons for sterling notes?"

Amelia replied, "That will be fine. Harry, he'll need 400 galleons from you."

Harry handed over the coins and Fangtooth weighed them in his hand, knowing by touch that the young wizard was neither over nor short in the count. Fangtooth replied, "I'll return in approximately nine minutes." He left the room and closed the door behind him.

Amelia opened the seal of the parchment marked Potter Will – Copy and spread it out on the table. Whereas she was examining the content, Harry was looking at the handwriting, which was obviously his mum's.

The estate distribution was straightforward; everything went to Harry upon his reaching the age of majority. It was the guardianship succession section that interested her – Sirius Black, Edgar and Rachel Bones, Frank and Alice Longbottom, or their successors.

She decided to look into who handled the execution of the will at a later time. Fangtooth opened the door and set an envelope on the table. He asked, "Will you need anything else today?"

She replied, "No, thank you."

As Fangtooth was leaving, Harry added, "Thank you, sir"

The old goblin turned around and replied, "It was a pleasure, Mr. Potter." It was all too rare that wizards exercised even the most basic courtesies towards goblins.

Amelia folded up the parchments and suggested, "Perhaps we should be on our way as well, Harry. A complete set of proper clothing aside, what would you like to look for?"

Harry considered her question for a moment and replied, "I would like a mobile phone like yours, a new pair of jeans, some proper treats for Hedwig, a swimming outfit, some stamps to mail a letter, a wand holster, a proper pair of shoes, and perhaps a few gifts, and if we have time, a new set of robes, and maybe some books. If we don't, then just the gifts and owl treats."

Amelia smiled at the teen, and replied, "I'm certain that we can manage to get everything on your list and a few others, if we hurry along. Let's get the muggle clothing and mobile phone first, then come back, get measured for robes, then have lunch. Afterwards, we can look for a few gifts, something for your owl and perhaps I can help you pick out a few books. Will that be acceptable to you?"

Harry nodded, and Amelia absently asked, "Where do you like to shop?"

Harry looked at his shoes and admitted, "Honestly, except for the time Hagrid took me when I was eleven, I've really never been. Sorry."

In as comforting a voice as an angry woman could muster, Amelia replied, "You've nothing to apologize for, Harry. Apparently your aunt

has been neglecting to offer you proper care for too long. When was the last time you were at the eye healer?"

Harry gave her a blank look as they walked down the alley and replied, "I don't know what you mean, sorry."

Feeling herself growing ever more frustrated, Amelia directed Harry into a small shop and asked, "Claire, could you possibly make time to see this young man in the next few days? He needs a complete examination and either new corrective lenses, or a permanent treatment, if it suits his condition."

The kindly eye healer replied, "Tomorrow at one is the earliest appointment that I have available. Who is your current healer Mr... well bless my soul. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter. I'm Healer Claire Singer."

Amelia saw the look of annoyance that Harry involuntarily gave when her gaze flicked upward to his scar. She added, "I'm certain that Harry values his privacy, and will be pleased with your services and confidentiality, Claire."

Clair took a small card from her desk and wrote the date and time of the appointment, then handed it to Harry, saying, "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Potter. I'll see you tomorrow at one."

Amelia replied, "Thanks, Claire. We'll be on our way then." Annoyed that she already had guessed the answer, she asked, "Hadn't Professor Dumbledore made arrangements to have you taken to Diagon Alley or other outings every few weeks?"

Harry replied, "Mrs. Weasley picked up my books before second year. I spent a few weeks at the Leakey Cauldron last summer, but..." Harry paused for a moment before admitting, "I didn't have my key. I just had enough coins to buy my books and a bit to eat."

Amelia didn't say anything for a moment. A lot of people had let Harry Potter down, chief among them, Dumbledore, but looking backward

wasn't going to do the teen any good. She announced, "I believe that you're on your way to a much more interesting summer this year."

Harry nodded and they walked in comfortable silence until they reached the first shop.

The next two and a half hours were among the longest of Harry's life. A pair of jeans led to six, whereas a pair of trainers led to three pair of shoes, stockings, pants and summer shirts. A new school robe at Malkins, led to three complete sets, outerwear, and dress robes, new ties, and a nice pair of dragonhide boots.

Fortunately, Amelia had them all shrunk down with a self-reversing charm set for eight hours.

It was getting to be nearly lunchtime and they hadn't yet gotten to the bookstore, the gift shop, found a wand holster or stopped at Eylops. Amelia had received an owl advising her that she had appointments all afternoon, and knew that Susan and Hannah had been promised lunch in five minutes. She said, "I'm sorry that the morning went by so fast, Harry. I have work all afternoon at the Ministry. Would it be all right if I asked Alastor Moody to help you finish up tomorrow morning?"

Seeing Harry nod, she continued, "He's a retired Auror and a good man, Harry, even if he looks a bit rough around the edges. I'll ask him to meet you at the Leaky Cauldron at ten if that's all right with you. I'm certain that your aunt won't object."

"Okay. I'll take the bus just like today. How will I know him?"

She smiled at his insight and replied, "His password will be a sentence ending in the word dragonhide and your reply will contain the word wandholster. Beyond that, he has an artificial eye that's fairly hard to miss. Now let me get you to the Hollow Quill. I really need to get back to the office."

... --- ...

Susan Bones tried to hide her excitement, but her lifelong friend saw through it in a minute. She teased her saying, "Relax Bones, its just lunch. Chat him up a bit, don't mention Granger or Black and invite him to go swimming at your house tomorrow."

All of Susan's childhood insecurities seemed to kick in at once, "Suppose he doesn't want to spend any time with me. What if Auntie scared him off? What if I scared him off?" Susan hadn't yet owned up to the "bathroom incident" to her friend.

Hannah gave her friend 'the look.' and replied, "Suppose, suppose, suppose. Just try it, and don't worry about his business with your aunt. If she were really worried about Black, she'd have told you something. Here he comes. Hey, he looks pretty good."

Harry walked up to the table and greeted the two teen witches, "Hi Susan, hi Hannah."

"Hi Harry," replied Susan. She pulled out a chair that was closer to, and facing her, and suggested, "Have a seat. How was shopping?"

Harry replied, "Brilliant, but tiring."

"What did you get?" asked Hannah, who was highly amused at the glances that Susan and Harry were throwing at each other.

"New shoes, stockings, some trousers that fit, jeans, a couple of shirts, a pair of board shorts, robes for school and a set of dress robes."

Hannah gave her friend a wink and silently urged her to move in for the kill.

"Maybe you should come over tomorrow afternoon and I could give you a swim lesson," suggested Susan, encouragingly.

A slightly wicked thought regarding swimming came to Hannah's mind, but she kept it to herself as she waited for Potter's acceptance of Susan's smoothly delivered offer.

Harry had a pained look on his face as he replied, "I can't, sorry." He wasn't experienced enough to explain his situation and ask to reschedule, and Susan wasn't confident enough of herself to get to the bottom of his refusal. They ate their lunch and made a bit of small talk, but Hannah could tell that her friend was nearly in tears. They parted ways about fifteen minutes later with Harry completely bewildered at what had transpired.

... --- ...

Wednesday 29 June

The twelve-foot snake wasn't indigenous to the Butrint forest in southern Albania. It had been brought there some fifteen seasons ago and somehow had been strengthened. As a result, it had grown both in power as well as size in the warm weather. It had not seen the man that had left it there, but the asp, which was now just over twelve feet, could feel the presence of the magical being that had somehow returned to it and spoken its name – Nagini.

Nagini sensed the small animal and was silently closing in on its prey when it felt an unusual movement. Where there had been a rat moments before, now stood a man!

Nagini felt the presence of the being that had inhabited it stir and it became very excited.

... --- ...

After a week of plodding aimlessly through the forests by Gadinje, Pettigrew had gone to the forest in the southern tip of the country bordering Greece. Even to the wizard's unattended senses, this area felt darker and somehow more dangerous.

Filthy from camping in the forests for days on end and nearly starving from hunger, Pettigrew had switched back and forth from his human form to the rat, which had an easier time finding edible food.

As the little light that found its way into the forest failed with the setting sun, the rat sensed the presence of a large predator nearby.



Pettigrew quickly changed back into human form and was startled to see an immense snake within striking distance. The snake raised its head and using its flicking tongue easily found the man.

As Pettigrew pulled his wand out of his pocket to defend himself, he felt a familiar presence. Too scared to move, he was astounded to see a black mist come out of the snake's mouth, forming a quaffle size cloud. In the quiet of the forest, he heard a voice call, "Wormtail" as he was enveloped by the mist.

A minute later, Pettigrew cleared his aching head, and in a raspy voice spoke a word, "Master."

... --- ...

Thursday 30 June

More than a week after his bungled luncheon with Susan and Hannah, Harry was still puzzled why it had ended so badly. When he had visited her home, and they'd gone for a walk in their back garden, everything had been comfortable, and she had been easy to talk to. Now he wasn't sure what to say.

He'd finally written Hermione asking for her telephone number so he could call her. Maybe she'd be able to help him.

As he was weeding the flowerbeds, he thought back to his afternoon with Master Auror (retired) Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody.

Harry had walked into the pub from the Charing Cross entrance. The old Auror was sitting at a table with his back to the wall. Where his right eye would normally be was a fitted, electric blue artificial eye that seemed to swivel and rove independently of the other, real one. He looked at the teen for half a minute and mentioned, "Good looking pair of boots you got on. Are they made of dragonhide?"

Harry replied, "Yes sir, they're Chinese Fireball." Then he remembered the password/response signal that Amelia had mentioned and he added, "I'm hoping to get a matching wand-holster."

Moody gave him a half smile, held out a hand, roughened from a lifetime of hard, honest work and said, "Hi kid. I'm Alastor Moody, but most people call me Mad-Eye. I'll answer to any of the three."

Harry shook the older man's hand and replied, "I'm Harry Potter, sir, just Harry."

Moody stood up and Harry saw that in addition to having had a bit of his nose removed, the old Auror had lost one of his legs somewhere, and had been fitted with an artificial peg-leg. Somehow it seemed to fit him well and he was surprisingly graceful with it, though he used a staff to help him balance from time to time. He said, "Amelia said that you needed to do some shopping today. What are you looking for?"

Harry replied, "I'd like a wand-holster, some extra defense and spellbooks and some treats for my owl. I need to stop at Gringotts first. I spent more than I'd expected to last time. Come to think about it, I think I need a bigger trunk too."

Moody gave half of a laugh and replied, "Aye son, that's the thing about going shopping with a woman. You go into a shop looking for a spoon, and come out with a dining room table." He gave a look up the street as they slowly made their way up the alleyway and suggested, "First things first. You walk over to Gringotts, and I'll take a look at the trunk shop that's half way down the street on the left." He conjured a black baseball style cap and handed it to the teen, saying, "Here, kid. Put this on. It'll keep people from getting too good of a look at you. I'll meet you at the trunk shop in ten minutes. Same password."

Harry nodded and walked at a brisk pace to Gringotts. Spending the afternoon with Mad-Eye seemed more like a dangerous adventure than shopping with Amelia. Longtooth took him back to his vault and suggested that Harry take more gold out this time. A thousand galleons and four thousand in sterling later, Harry again remembered to thank the old goblin as he dashed out of the bank.

He walked into the trunk shop, they exchanged their passwords and Moody showed him some of the more exotic trunks. "This one is like my own - multi compartment and a key for each one. Mine has seven.

This one has four, but it ought to be more than plenty to meet your needs for years to come. Well made and it has sturdy hinges. Self shrinking too, so you can carry it around easier. I wish my own had that feature.”

“How much is it?” asked Harry.

“There’s always a bit of negotiating to be done with these things. Could you afford a hundred galleons, if it comes to that?”

Harry nodded. He’d expected to pay five times that amount.

Moody replied, “I’ll talk with the shopkeeper. You stand over there and look at the student models for a few minutes till I call you over.”

Harry went to the other side of the cluttered shop and Moody called the shopkeeper over, saying, “I’d like to get this trunk as a gift for someone. What’s yer best price on it?”

The shopkeeper, who to Harry sounded like the oily shopkeeper that he’d heard in Knockturn Alley two years ago replied, “Master Auror Moody. How nice to see you again. I suppose that I could possibly let it go for three hundred and twenty galleons.”

Moody replied, “Aye and next you’ll be asking for my other leg too. I’ll give you forty-five for it. Like I said, it’s a gift for someone that you would be very pleased to say was using one of your trunks.”

The shopkeeper considered the possible value of being able to mention that the Aurors were using these trunks and replied, “I suppose that could be arranged. In that case, I could sacrifice and let you have it for two forty, no two hundred and fifteen.”

Moody gave his magical eye a roll upwards and Harry came to believe that it wasn’t just randomly spinning like he’d first believed.

The shopkeeper, sensing that Moody may have been searching his back room for contraband, remarked, “And for today only, I suppose, it could go for two hundred, even.”

Moody replied, "I want this for Harry Potter, and I'll give you sixty, not a knut more."

The shopkeeper laughed and replied, "Right Moody, and me mum's the queen herself. And me nephew Stan's good friends with Potter too, I suppose. If that trunks for lil Harry Potter, you bring him in, and you can have it for your sixty galleons. Ha, that's a good one, and next you'll be telling me that me arse is on fire too."

Moody, replied, "I wouldn't know about your arse, Stan, but the lad's over there waiting for us to finish, "Harry, come on over. Say hello to an old friend, Stanley Patrick Shunpike."

Harry walked over and in a polite voice greeted the man, "Hello, sir." He took off his cap and added, "I'd be happy to pay you two hundred galleons for that trunk."

The old shopkeeper shook the teen's hand and replied, "Nonsense, lad. Sixty is more than fair. I was afraid that I'd be stuck accepting Mad-Eye's first offer, the thieving bastard. You two finish yer shopping, and I'll have it ready for you in an hour."

They finished their shopping, getting Harry a Chinese Red wrist model wandholster, a spare wand, treats for Hedwig and fifteen defense books - from escape methods, to books on disillusionment, defensive transfiguration and a book on attack charms. Harry had offered to buy Moody dinner, and to his surprise and delight, the old Auror accepted.

Both men thought that they'd gotten the better deal out of the afternoon. Harry had gotten some first rate equipment and had easily been saved several hundred galleons, and Moody had gotten a first rate dinner and a few drinks for free, all the while meeting a very interesting young man.

... --- ...

Harry pulled on an especially stubborn weed and decided that he'd write Susan and explain that her aunt had made arrangements for him to see an eye healer and to do some shopping with Mad-Eye.

He'd also mention that he really would appreciate some swim lessons, if she'd be willing to spend any time with him.

Just then Hedwig flew back from Hermione's. Harry hoped that his friend had an idea that would help him. He opened the note and quickly read it.

Dear Harry,

For goodness sake, she probably thought that you were turning her down, or were mad at her. Send Hedwig to her house right now with a note apologizing, and explain that you had an eye doctor appointment already scheduled. I think swim lessons would be a great idea. I'm sorry that you didn't already have them when you were younger, but now would be a great time to learn.

As soon as you've sent Hedwig off with her note, call me. Here's my telephone number.

Love from,

Hermione

Things always made so much more sense when he talked them over with Hermione. He went inside and washed up, then wrote Susan a note for Hedwig to deliver. After he'd wished his trusty owl a good flight, he called the number that she'd written down.

A cheery voice answered, "Grangers. This is Hermione."

"Hi, this is Harry."

"Hi Harry. Have you heard from Sirius? How was the eye healer? What books did you get? Tell me about your new trunk. Oh, I'm so glad that you called."

Harry chuckled and replied, "One question at a time Hermione. Where do you live?"

Hermione gave him her address and Harry asked, "Can I stop over?"

Hermione replied, "Of course you can, you don't need to ask. Is your Aunt going to drive you? You're not going to fly over here, are you? Harry Potter, don't you even think about it, you'll get in so much trouble." She kept this up nonstop for five minutes, while Harry grabbed his wands, shrunk his trunk, walked out to the front yard, took a look around and held his wand out. He held his hand over the phone while Stan gave his customary greeting and Hermione was just finishing when she heard a loud bang out in front of her house. Harry was just getting off the bus when he heard Hermione say, "Call back in a minute Harry, something just happened out in front."

Needless to say, Harry was just about to knock on the door, when his bushy haired friend burst through the front door, knocking him over and off of the front step and onto the sidewalk.

Seeing what she'd done, she began apologizing profusely, "Oh Harry, I didn't know it was you. Are you all right? How did you get here so fast?"

A few steps slower than her overly excited daughter, an older version of Harry's friend walked through the still open door, and helped her daughter pick up her best friend. Smiling at him, she asked, "I hope all of her greetings aren't so lively. You must be Harry. I'm Hermione's mum, Emma Granger."

Not at all injured, Harry took her offered hand and replied, "I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Granger."

Harry explained about taking the Knight Bus, and how it was loaded with Notice-Me-Not charms, and was quite safe to call from any location.

"Where do you live, Harry?" asked Emma, who was quite interested in how the magical transportation system worked. Harry told her, and she calculated "That's about twenty miles and easily an hour's drive with traffic. How soon before you called had you left?"

"I didn't," replied Harry. "I didn't have the address until I called, and it took me a minute to gather up my stuff, so I suppose the ride was about four or five minutes at the most."

"How could the bus possibly go so fast?" asked Emma, trying to do the math taking into account the time required to get on and off the bus.

"Magic, I suppose," replied Harry, who hadn't really thought about it, while Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head at her friend's simplistic answer to a question that clearly deserved at least a roll of parchment to properly explain.

Emma smiled at the contrast between her overly enthusiastic daughter and her very down to earth, but apparently famous friend. They talked for a while as Harry was dragged into showing them his new trunk, books and wizard robes.

Suddenly Hermione demanded, "Harry, where are your glasses?"

Harry thought for a moment, and replied, "They must be out in front." He walked out the front door, saw them lying in the grass, picked them up and put them in his pocket.

When he walked back to the kitchen table where they'd been visiting, Mrs. Granger inquired, "Harry, if you need glasses, why aren't you wearing them?"

He replied, "Susan's Aunt took me to an eye healer, and made an appointment. I went in the next day and she looked at my eyes for a few minutes and asked if I wanted them fixed, or if I'd rather have new glasses. The Auror that had taken me the next day had suggested that I do both, and I did."

"What do you mean?" asked the now confused oral surgeon.

"Well she fixed my eyes, and made me a pair of glasses like he'd suggested."

Emma asked, "Like sunglasses?"

Harry shook his head and replied, "Not really. They can supposedly see through disguises and stuff."

Hermione asked, "Do they really work? Are they even legal? Harry Potter, don't you dare misuse them."

Harry considered her words for a moment and rather than defend future use of something that he hadn't even considered, replied, "Says the girl who manipulated time for an entire year just to take a couple of extra classes."

Hermione laughed at herself, and they spent several hours catching up. Harry explained about the ease of using the Knight Bus and his magical trunk. He lent her half of the new books that he'd bought and gave her his cell phone number.

Mrs. Granger commented, "Isn't that rather expensive, Harry? Why wouldn't you just use your relatives' phone?"

Harry's look darkened slightly for a second. Then he replied, "This will work better. They really don't want me..." He was going to say 'using their phone,' but the reality was 'living anywhere near them.'

Hermione caught the implication of his unfinished sentence and changed the subject by asking, "Did you write Susan back?"

Harry nodded and explained what he'd written, which seemed to pass his friend's unwritten standards of good "boy behavior" relating to a girl.

He left a while after, promising to call in a few days.

... --- ...

Hermione liked Susan and knew her a bit from the arithmancy class that they had together. She recognized that Harry needed someone who, like herself, could look at her best friend, and see Harry, not the Boy-Who-Lived. She also thought that Harry could look at Susan, and see the kind hearted girl who was struggling with her physical



changes, and just not a pair of boobs on a stick looking like a desert to be eaten, like some of the boys at school seemed to think.

As she was getting ready for bed, Ron's little owl fluttered through her window and dropped a note on her desk. It excitedly flew around her room, occasionally dive-bombing her annoyed cat Crookshanks while waiting for the witch to write a reply to the invitation.

... --- ...

Friday 1 July

Susan woke up the next morning and when she came down for breakfast, saw a beautiful white owl waiting patiently on the kitchen windowsill. Her aunt Amelia smiled and suggested, "I think that's Harry's owl and the note is addressed to you, dear."

Susan reached over to Hedwig, who hopped onto the table right in front of the anxious teen and help out her leg. She ripped open the note and began to ask, "Why didn't you tell me..." then she realized that it wasn't Amelia's place to comment on Harry's medical appointments, and that it was simple inexperience in communication, and not disinterest that had gotten them off track.

Amelia waited patiently for her grandniece to draw her own conclusions, and then suggested, "Maybe you should invite him over tomorrow. The weather is supposed to be sunny, and Smidgen could make you two lunch. He could stay for dinner if you'd like. Connie and Rufus are coming over, and they'd probably like to meet him. Send him a note, be sure to mention dinner, and suggest that he bring a robe along for dinner. Have a good day over at Hannah's."

Hedwig waited patiently while her master's friend composed her thoughts and attached the message to her leg for the return flight.

... --- ...

That evening after washing the dishes, Harry went up to his room to read his new book on offensive spells. He was quite interested in various uses of the Reducto spell that they'd been introduced to in

charms class at the very end of third year. Harry wished that he'd thought to try to blast that rat Pettigrew as he'd scurried off into the darkness that night, but recognized that hindsight was nearly always 20-20.

Ron's owl fluttered in through the open window, carrying a note. Harry caught the excited owl and untied the string holding the note.

Harry,

You need to come over on 24 August. Dad got tickets for all of us to the Quidditch World Cup! We'll leave first thing in the morning the next day. Dad's borrowed a couple of tents that we can stay in after the match. They usually go on quite a while, but not always.

Hermione's coming too. It should be great.

See ya,

Ron

A few minutes later, Hermione called and asked, "Did you get the note from Ron yet? Pig was over a half hour ago and had notes for both of us. I'd better tell Ron not to tie two notes to the little owl at the same time, they might have been too heavy for him."

Harry agreed and suggested that they go to Ron's together. "We could take the Knight Bus and be there in a half hour, if your mum wouldn't mind."

Hermione agreed and asked if he'd heard back from Susan yet.

Harry replied, "No. Not yet. She might have been busy or something and Hedwig might have had to wait a while."

Hermione gave a cheerful reply, "I'm sure she'll write back soon. Have a good night, Harry."

"You too. Bye."

A minute later, Hedwig flew in the window. She had a note tied to one leg, and a dead rat clutched in her other claw.

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The old scribe waited to see McGonagall's reaction. She put the parchment down and Crow noticed that she'd marked several passages. Finally she looked up and Crow noticed her thin lips.

"We have discussed cliffhangers and crude remarks before, Mr. Crow."

It was only then that she noticed that he'd already left and was on his way. She would have to get some of the storyteller referrals that he had mentioned before examining his report.

... --- ...

## Chapter Three

### Aqua Man and the Mermaid

Friday 1 July

Ludo Bagman envisioned a solution to a small problem that he had. He was a player, and generally thought that he was skilled in games of chance. For each of the casino games that he played, or sports that he wagered on, he had worked out a system. His favorite betting strategy was to leave when he was twenty percent up and double up on his bets when he went on a losing streak, with the rationalization that with even-chance games, it was quite unlikely that he would lose as many as five or six times in a row.

Unfortunately, that was exactly what had happened when he had visited the muggle casino in London the last time. Worse yet, he had been playing with large stakes and had borrowed ten thousand galleons from the Gringotts sub-prime lenders to help bankroll the excursion.

His evening there had started out well, and initially he had been ahead several thousand pounds. Things had gone wrong when he decided to make one last bet to really cap off a good evening. He lost, and went into his tried and true strategy. Two thousand pounds, went to four, which went to a wager of eight, and then sixteen. He briefly considered quitting at thirty-two thousand but went for broke at sixty-four thousand.

He lost.

In the course of the evening, he'd lost the equivalent of twenty thousand galleons and was beyond broke. Fortunately, the goblins believed that he had good credit, and were quite willing to lend him a second ten thousand galleons, though at a higher rate.

Sipping a glass of Chivas, he decided that his next game would be a sure thing. He knew that Ireland would be the sentimental favorite for the upcoming Quidditch World Cup, but having seen both teams play

as part of his job, he knew that Bulgaria had the better seeker and was confident that it would be a quick match, allowing Bulgaria the win. He'd take mostly bets from the Irish fans and would easily triple his money when Bulgaria won. There was no need to lay off some of the bets to a Bulgarian based bookmaker to even his action, since he was so sure of the win. By the end of the match, he'd have the goblin bankroll loans paid off and still be six or seven thousand galleons ahead. Not a bad day, considering that his annual salary at the ministry was just under seventy-five hundred galleons a year.

... --- ...

Harry looked at Hedwig, noticed that the rat that she'd caught still had all of its toes and he stroked her wing as she dropped the dead rodent onto the bottom of her cage and put her leg out so that Harry could untie the string holding Susan's letter before enjoying her meal. He opened it up and read:

Hi Harry,

We'll both have to work on improving our communication skills as we get to know each other better. I'll work harder at not jumping to conclusions, and I hope you'll keep telling me what's happening in your life. On a happier subject, I'd like it very much if you'd be able to come over tomorrow morning about ten. Please bring your new swim suit, and also a set of robes. Auntie and I would also enjoy having you stay for dinner. Auntie invited two people from her work, Connie Hammer and Rufus Scrimgeour. They both are heads of their respective auror departments. Connie used to babysit me when I was little, and Rufus worked with Alastor Moody, who I understand you spent time with last week.

See you tomorrow,

Susan

Harry read the letter a second time, and silently thanked Hermione for providing him good advice on making things right with Susan. He went to bed considerably happier than the night before.

... --- ...

Saturday 2 July

Harry got up early the next morning and trimmed the hedge before breakfast. While they were eating the food that Harry had cooked, Dudley complained bitterly about having to sweep off the driveway. "Have Potter do it," he whined. "He's the know-it-all when it comes to brooms."

Vernon's face turned a deep shade of puce before he realized that it was his son and not the Potter brat who had brought up the unnaturalness. He growled, "Just do your own work, son, and the boy will do his." While Petunia had suggested that both boys should do chores around the house "to build character" she hadn't brought up the Ministry woman's other warnings.

"But..." tried Dudley, who was more than prepared to spend a half hour in order to weasel his way out of a five minute job. His mother gave him "the look," that said his tantrums wouldn't work this time.

As they were getting up from the table and Harry was gathering the dishes, he announced, "I'll be home after dinner tonight."

Vernon was about to say something when Harry commented, "The newspaper mentioned something about my godfather being sighted in Surrey. Apparently Director Bones wanted to talk with me about it."

If the truth were known, Harry was fairly certain that one of the aurors was responsible for occasionally planting those stories. Harry had called Amelia late last night after a large tropical bird flew into his window with the briefest of notes.

Harry,

I'm fine. I'll write in a few weeks. Thank the girl again for me when you get a chance.

Love,

Snuffles.

He was grateful for Amelia's co-operation, and smiled to himself as he remembered the colorful green and yellow bird flying back out of his window. She had believed his story without any real proof, and hadn't widened the search for Sirius, like she certainly could have.

Vernon just sputtered about keeping the other freaks away from his home, and walked out the door on his way to the club. He would have to remind the boy that he was a guest in their home, not a family member, and needed to know his place.

An hour later, Harry had finished the rest of his chores while Dudley had spent an equal amount of time leaning on his broom complaining before pushing the broom twice and telling Potter to hang it up. Harry went up to the bathroom to clean up before he gathered his things together for his visit to Susan's home in Welshpool.

... --- ...

Susan waited nervously for Harry to arrive. Like most teens just turning fourteen, her body was a work in progress. The clothing that she'd bought over spring break didn't seem to fit correctly anymore... In her mind, there were a million things wrong with her, though she did like her strawberry blonde hair, especially as the sun lightened it up a bit in the summer months.

She didn't know whether to be annoyed or relieved when Hannah announced that she was having lunch and an afternoon outing with her mum, and wouldn't be able to come over for the day. On one hand, it would allow them time to visit together, and she knew that she could be a really good listener if he wanted to talk about anything. On the other hand, if the conversation dragged, Hannah wouldn't be there to tell interesting stories about the smallest things.

She looked through her collection of swimsuits for the day, and decided on a nautical navy colored flyback one-piece. She thought it looked okay on her, and if Harry really had never been swimming, and needed lessons, it might be a bit less distracting than the little bikinis that she usually wore sunning with Hannah.

Armed with two beach towels, and some suntan lotion, she glanced through the Daily Prophet while she waited for Harry to arrive. Hannah's dad, Ben, who was one of the school governors, had announced the hiring of retired Master Auror Alastor Moody for the post of DADA instructor at Hogwarts. She had liked last year's teacher, Professor Lupin, and had hoped that he would stay for a second year, before he left suddenly just before term had ended.

She thought about Harry while she waited. He always seemed to be in the know about what was going on at the school, and was somehow involved with it. The official story first year was that Professor Quirrell had somehow been a victim of spontaneous combustion, but Harry ended up in the hospital wing and Professor Dumbledore had awarded him and his friends over a hundred-fifty points for some very vague reasons at the end of year feast.

Second year was even weirder with Lockhart losing his memory and Ginny Weasley getting taken into the Chamber of Secrets, whatever that was. By the time third year had come around, there were rumors that Harry had fought and killed a ghost and a fifty-foot basilisk that apparently had been roaming the hallways the previous term. The facts were scarce about what had really happened, but everyone had said that Ginny Weasley was practically a different person after whatever had happened to her.

This last year... Even Auntie had admitted that something weird had happened regarding Harry, dementors and Sirius Black. It must have been serious for her to get involved in her official position. Maybe she'd hear something today.

Nothing like that ever happened in Hufflepuff. Stebbins' older sister had gotten pregnant while she was still in school, but that was two years ago. No, what attracted her to Harry were the contrasts about what kind of a person he was. He was sweet and shy, kind and generous, gentle but amazingly quick, soft-spoken but amazingly skilled. For some reason he always ended up in dangerous situations through no fault of his own. Somehow, she felt that he had a greater destiny than many, and that somehow, she didn't know how, but somehow she fit in.



Her thoughts were interrupted by the distinctive bang of the Knight Bus stopping in her front yard. She opened the front door, smiled at him and said, "Good morning, Harry. You can set your stuff down over there."

He smiled back at her, replying, "Hi Susan. Thanks for having me over today."

"It took a while, but I'm glad that you're here. Go get changed in the bathroom, and I'll wait down here." They made eye contact and laughed.

If the truth were told, Harry was a terrible swimmer. Built with about zero body fat, he tended to sink like a rock. What he did seem to enjoy was swimming underwater on the shallow end and standing up when he needed to take a breath.

After paddling around a bit, she had him try and float on his back. Supporting him about mid back she suggested, "Tilt your head back, Harry. Okay take a big breath and hold it in. She tentatively let go and he was just slightly buoyant. Okay, now kick a bit."

After a bit, she saw that he was getting more comfortable in the water and they took turns splashing and chasing each other around the pool. Susan got on her floatie and Harry used his as a kickboard as he went tirelessly up and down the length of the pool until it was time for lunch.

Unasked, Harry had volunteered to make lunch for them, but Susan reminded him that Smidgen would be offended if they were caught doing her job for her. The little elf had prepared a light lunch of ham and turkey sandwiches, crisps and an orange for them. They sat outside under an umbrella picnic table and munched on their lunch while they sipped butterbeers.

The rain came down after lunch, so they went inside. Susan had about a thousand questions that she wanted to ask, but didn't want to appear to be pressing, so she suggested a game that she and Hannah would play occasionally.

"How do we do it?" asked Harry.

Susan explained, "We take turns asking questions. We can pass on any of them that you want, but then the other person gets to ask another question. You can go first."

"Sounds fun," Harry agreed. He took a sip of his butterbeer and asked his first question. "How long have you known Hannah?"

She smiled and replied, "Forever. Our mums were best friends in school. I went to primary school with her by taking the floo and telling the school that I lived at her house." She looked at him to see if he was satisfied with her answer.

Harry nodded and suggested, "Your turn. Ask away."

"All right then." She gave a fake evil laugh and said, "I've got you now, Mr. Harry Potter." She thought for a moment, decided to start slow with easy questions and work her way up to the tricky ones. She asked, "Aside from quidditch, are you good at any other sports?"

Harry shook his head and replied, "The only other sport I've played was being an unwilling participant in my cousin's games of Harry Hunting, where he and his pals would chase me around and beat me up if they caught me. He made sure that I was never allowed to play any of the activity sports at primary school." He thought for a moment and replied, "Probably wasn't the answer that you were looking for, but it's the only one that I have."

Susan felt bad for having asked the question and replied, "I'm sorry about that, Harry. You're too good of a person to have been treated like that. Your turn."

Harry asked, "What's it like living with your aunt?"

Susan smiled and replied, "Pretty nice, actually, though to be honest, I spend nearly as much time with the Abbotts. We each have a bedroom at each others' house." She thought about the other dimensions of his question for a minute and added, "I worry about her

work, much more now that I understand a bit more about what she's actually responsible for than when I was a little girl. She's always taken good care of me and helped me make good decisions. She's older than our own parents would be, but she takes the time to talk with me and more importantly, listen to me. All in all, it's pretty nice. Okay, my turn. Why did you buy a Firebolt broom after your other one got smashed by that stupid tree?"

Harry smiled as he recalled Hermione's concern over the origin of his broom and replied, "I didn't. I mean I didn't buy it. My godfather, Sirius bought it for me." He wasn't sure how much she'd heard, and he didn't want to make her uncomfortable, so he let it go. She could always ask another question.

"What did your parents do?"

Susan gave a sad smile and replied, "They were murdered the same week that yours were, Harry. My dad was a newly graduated auror, the same as your dad. My mum worked in her mum's greenhouse, growing and selling magical herbs." Seeing the look of surprise on his face, she asked, "What do you know about your parents, Harry?"

She watched the slightly sad expression on his face as he replied, "Practically nothing, to tell you the truth. Mr. Ollivander told me that my mum was good at charms, Professor Lupin told me that my dad and mum were head boy and girl, and that they sometimes pulled pranks together. You told me that my dad worked as an auror. To be honest, that's about it. I grew up believing that they were drunk and were killed in a car crash."

"That foul bitch," muttered Susan, though a bit louder than she might have intended, as she saw Harry smile at her righteous anger over his aunt and uncle's rude behavior.

Harry decided to go with a safe question and asked, "When's your birthday?"

"July fourth. I'll be fourteen. Yours?"

"July 31. Me too."

She made eye contact, smiled and replied, "We'll have to celebrate together. My turn now – Remember - you don't have to answer if you don't want, okay?"

"Okay."

"What happened at the end of first year?"

Harry scratched his head while he was thinking about what to say, but there was no hesitation or doubt in his mind that he would tell her. He excused himself for a minute to use the bathroom and collect his thoughts.

In the meanwhile, every shred of self-confidence that Susan possessed was melting away like ice on a hot, breezy day. After he returned, she was just about to reach out to hug him and apologize when he began.

"Really, the story began the night Voldemort killed my parents and then tried to kill me. For some reason, his killing curse didn't work, but he didn't quite die either when it rebounded and hit him. He's kind of like a cloud of black specks right now. Somehow he took over Professor Quirrell, sometime the summer before our first year, I'd guess. Anyway, for some reason, he found out about Nicolas Flamel's philosopher stone that apparently could make the elixir of life. Professor Dumbledore decided to hide the stone in the castle..."

Harry went on for another ten minutes, but it was the end of the story that affected Susan so much. "...And then I killed Quirrell, and just as he was dying, Voldemort's spirit left the body and flew off somewhere else."

Susan shook her head and argued, "Harry, regardless of what you think, you didn't kill Professor Quirrell. His fate was probably sealed the moment that he allowed, He Who... You-kno... Voldemort into his body. There I did it. Professor Quirrell killed himself, he just hadn't died yet. The real thing to remember is that, at least for a while, you won another round."

“That’s pretty much what Professor Dumbledore told me... except he wasn’t holding my hand. He wasn’t wearing a pretty swimsuit either.”

Susan enjoyed Harry’s reply but grimaced at the thought of old Professor Dumbledore in a swimsuit and suggested, “Probably just as well. You’re way cuter. She looked at him and they started laughing. She flicked a bottle cap at him playfully and commanded, “Back in the pool, aqua-man.”

“Okay, pretty mermaid.”

The afternoon passed far too rapidly in their minds.

... --- ...

Rufus Scrimgeour had observed two unusual events this week. His direct manager, Bones, had invited him over for dinner, and Bones’ dotted line boss, Fudge had made a direct request that he double the on-duty aurors patrolling Diagon alley the night of the Quidditch World Cup.

Neither request made sense. Bones always had everyone over every year in September, ostensibly to celebrate the fall equinox. In reality, it was to celebrate school being back in session, and to take an opportunity to thank each of her people for another year’s hard work.

It was Fudge’s request that really puzzled the career auror. Staffing up for the World Cup made sense, but as host country, deploying the extra manpower in an area that would most likely be all but deserted at the time didn’t make any sense, let alone breaking the chain of command to make the request. Gringotts had their own security, and Scrimgeour really didn’t think that a contingent of dark wizards would suddenly pop up and raid Fortescue’s supply of double chocolate ice cream when no one was looking.

... --- ...

Master investigator Connie Hammer was delighted at the opportunity to see her favorite teenager – little Suzie Bones. A handful of years younger than Amelia, Connie had worked with or for the other woman

for forty years. The investigative branch of the DMLE had three major responsibilities - gathering enough evidence in criminal investigations to ensure a high conviction rate, serve as the internal investigation unit, and perform on-going investigations of the so-called cold-cases, which the auror team considered unsolvable.

Like Scrimgeour, she had been somewhat surprised at the invitation for dinner tonight, for two reasons – first, she was already invited over for Susie’s birthday celebration in just a few days, secondly, Amelia had said that the dinner was “mostly social” which was an odd choice of words in their line of work.

... --- ...

Amelia came home at six and greeted the two teens. “Hello Harry, hi Susie. How was your day?”

“Fantastic,” replied Harry for the both of them. “I learned to swim a bit, we had a great lunch, Susan and I talked a bit and we floated in the pool for a while.”

“Sounds like you both had fun,” she said, noticing Susie nodding in agreement. “Connie and Rufus should be here in a few minutes. Harry, I brought a solicitor pensieve home from work. I was hoping that you would share your memory of that night in the shack.”

Harry nodded, but replied, “Okay, but I’d like to leave Hermione and Buckbeak out of this for now if that’s alright? Actually, I have three memories that are all related to Pettigrew that I’d like to share, if you have the time to look at them.”

“That would be very helpful, Harry. Thank you.” replied Amelia.

“What do I need to do?”

“Have your wand out, Think very specifically of them, say duplicata and hold your wand to your temple and slowly draw it away.”

Harry did as she had told him and drew the three memories, placing the thin silvery strands into the bowl.

Just as he was finishing, he heard Susie squeal, "Connie!!!"

Connie Hammer gave the happy teen a big hug and said, "I'm so happy to see you, Susie. You look great. Have you been out in the sun?"

Susan replied, "Nearly every day since school let out. Connie, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine from school, Harry Potter."

Surprised at the opportunity to meet the legend in person, she smiled at him and said, "Good evening, Mr. Potter. It's an honor to meet you."

"Harry, Ma'am. Just Harry."

She smiled and replied, "It's an honor to meet you, just Harry. Just Connie."

A thick Scottish voice added, "As long as we're at it, just Harry, I'm just Rufus, Rufus Scrimgeour." It didn't sound especially sincere.

As trusting as ever, Harry replied, "I'm pleased to meet you, sir."

Susan watched her friend meet and greet the two and realized that her aunt hadn't arranged a social visit after all. Scrimgeour was looking at Harry almost as if he were a sack of galleons that he'd just found in the street. It was at that time that she recognized that her friend needed shielding from those witches and wizard who would exploit his kindness and trust to the point that Harry could become a bitter young man. She recognized that to some point Harry's friend Hermione had, consciously or not, served as a buffer between the twittering fan girls and him.

Amelia gathered everyone in the sitting room and Smidgen got them all beverages. Scrimgeour casually mentioned that there had been a credible sighting of Black in Birmingham, and Amelia announced, "It is largely to that end that I've gathered you here tonight. Harry has some information that is highly relevant to Sirius Black. With his permission, I have collected three memories." She looked at Harry

who nodded and said, "The first one deserves your open mind and complete attention."

She tapped the bowl and a second later; they were in the Shrieking Shack reliving Pettigrew's confession.

Ten seconds later, it was obvious that she wasn't just showing home movies. Scrimgeour did give the memory his complete attention and tried to notice everything that he could about Black, Potter and Pettigrew.

Ten minutes later, the implication of the shoddy investigative work hit Connie like an ocean wave, she muttered, "He didn't even get a trial."

Amelia wanted to respect Harry's wishes and play the other two memories before they got bogged down in discussion. She asked, "Which one is next, Harry?"

He replied, "The one with the woman."

She tapped the bowl and another image arose like a hologram.

Harry was in the end of year individual divination exam with Sybill Trelawney.

"Well, dear, I think we'll leave it there.... A little disappointing...

but I'm sure you did your best."

Relieved, Harry got up, picked up his bag and turned to go, but then a loud, harsh voice spoke behind him.

"IT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT."

Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her armchair; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth sagging.

"S -- sorry?" said Harry.



But Professor Trelawney didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll. Harry sat there in a panic. She looked as though she was about to have some sort of seizure. He hesitated, thinking of running to the hospital wing -- and then Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own:

"THE DARK LORD LIES ALONE AND FRIENDLESS, ABANDONED BY HIS FOLLOWERS.

HIS SERVANT HAS BEEN CHAINED THESE TWELVE YEARS. TONIGHT, BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT WILL BREAK FREE AND SET OUT TO REJOIN HIS

MASTER. THE DARK LORD WILL RISE AGAIN WITH HIS SERVANTS AID, GREATER AND MORE TERRIBLE THAN EVER HE WAS. TONIGHT... BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT... WILL SET OUT... TO REJOIN... HIS MASTER....

Scrimgeour spoke for everyone when he muttered, "Oh shite!" He decided that he was much more interested in the Potter boy than he'd been an hour ago.

Amelia quickly tapped the pensieve again while she considered what she'd just seen.

The third image arose with Harry sitting in Lupin's recently vacated office. Professor Dumbledore walked in.

"Why so miserable, Harry?" he said quietly. "You should be very proud of yourself after last night."

"It didn't make any difference," said Harry bitterly. "Pettigrew got away."

"Didn't make any difference?" said Dumbledore quietly, "It made all the difference in the world, Harry. You helped uncover the truth. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate."

Terrible. Something stirred in Harry's memory. Greater and more terrible than ever before... Professor Trelawney's prediction!

"Professor Dumbledore -- yesterday, when I was having my Divination exam, Professor Trelawney went very -- very strange."

"Indeed?" said Dumbledore. "Er -- stranger than usual, you mean?"

"Yes... her voice went all deep and her eyes rolled and she said ... she said Voldemort's servant was going to set out to return to him before midnight.... She said the servant would help him come back to power." Harry stared up at Dumbledore. "And then she sort of became normal again, and she couldn't remember anything she'd said. Was it -- was she making a real prediction?"

Dumbledore looked mildly impressed.

"Do you know, Harry, I think she might have been," he said thoughtfully. "Who'd have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise...."

Amelia rose and in a grateful voice said, "Thank you, Harry. That gives us a lot to discuss after dinner." They were all wondering what her first prediction had been.

"Wait!" demanded Susan. She leaned over and whispered to Harry, "Would you show them the one from first year with Quirrell and the cloud of Voldemort vanishing?"

"Do you think it's important?"

"Please, Harry." She gave his shoulder a squeeze. "We can go outside after dinner and let them discuss every little detail that they need to."

"Okay."

He walked to the pensieve, drew his wand said, "Duplicata," and a few seconds later withdrew a longer silver strand.

"Use the boy..."

Harry didn't need or want to relive that memory and walked outside for a few minutes while the others watched with rapt attention.

Connie felt sick to her stomach as a single word came to mind – Horcrux.

Smidgen served an outstanding dinner, but the conversation was quiet. Between the battle with Quirrel/Voldemort for the philosopher's stone and the image of Harry's massive patronus charm driving a hundred angry dementors away; there was little doubt amongst the three adults that they had enjoyed a fine dinner with the most powerful and arguably bravest young man of his generation.

There was no doubt in their minds of Black's innocence and that a gross miscarriage of justice had taken place. In the same breath, there was no doubt that Pettigrew was serving the dark lord and that very dark days were just ahead for the wizarding world.

After Harry had left and Susan had gone to bed, the three adults talked long into the night. They concluded that while dark days were indeed ahead, they had been handed an advance warning. Fudge might set the overall budget for DMLE but Amelia was responsible for the allocation and proper execution. They needed to quickly make some changes in how they operated and planned.

...---...

Back in the forest, Pettigrew hurried back to his master, as he ignored the screams. "Here's the baby, master. A one year old male, like you asked for."

The cloud emerged from the snake and replied, "Very good, Wormtail. Now add the venom to the potion and place the baby in the cauldron."

Miles away, Harry tossed and turned as the horrible vision went on. An hour later, a scaly, red-faced, creature that only vaguely resembled a baby emerged from the cauldron, and pulled itself up.

Harry Potter staggered out of his bed and lost the contents of his fine dinner onto the floor.

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The old scribe waited as McGonagall read his latest report. “More product placements, Mr. Crow? I believe that you agreed to stop that behavior last time.”

Again, when she looked up he was gone, on his way to a very long ride through the desert.

He had made a reference to another storyteller, Defender Paladin. She would check her files, as she didn’t recall the name.

## Chapter Four

### Poppy's Shame

Sunday 3 July

Amelia got up early. Whether she had actually gone to bed or simply had taken a nap for a few hours was debatable, but her mind was racing and she was trying to make some semblance of order out of the variety of thoughts that were flashing through her brain. Easily the most disturbing was the vision of little Harry, age eleven, battling for his life and seeing the spirit of Voldemort ordering Quirrell to kill Harry in order to steal a stone which would grant him virtual immortality. She was in awe of the little boy making every attempt that was humanly possible to protect himself, and then watched again in horror as Quirrell burst into flame from contact as the spirit of Voldemort drifted away like a swarm of black flies.

She couldn't think of a spell that would cause a body to turn to ash like she'd witnessed, let alone one that could possibly be cast wandlessly by a first year. She wasn't certain if it was the most powerful case of accidental magic that she'd ever witnessed, or if Harry had developed some sort of natural protection against Tom Riddle.

Recalling that the memory that she had just reviewed was over two years old, and that Trelawney's prophecy, made about a month ago, spoke of the present and near future, she was certain that Riddle wasn't dead, and that something was anchoring him to this plane of existence.

Her concentration was broken by her cell phone ringing. She picked it up, answering, "Amelia Bones."

"This is Harry, Can I come over?"

"Of course you can, Harry. What's wrong? Where are you?" She looked at her watch. It was just after four in the morning.

The panicked voice on the other end replied, "My uncle... at the Dursleys." The phone sounded like it was flung at a wall, and there was a muffled scream.

"I'll be right there, Harry!"

She grabbed her wand, dashed outside to the little spot by the picnic table that was unwarded against apparation and disappeared. Two seconds later, she was across the street from number four. She could see a light on in the room upstairs that had the open window. Silently unlocking the front door, she could hear a man shouting, rather ranting. She dashed up the stairs and stunned the walrus sized man just as he landed another kick at the boy who was covering his head with his arms.

"Stupefy. Incarcerous." Vernon Dursley went down hard on the little bed, collapsing the frame onto the floor with a crash.

She looked around the room and saw a puddle of vomit that someone had attempted to clean up with a blood-streaked towel. She fired off two messaging spells and bent down to examine the whimpering boy who was still huddled in the corner.

"Harry, its Amelia. Talk to me."

A small voice whimpered, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'll clean it up. I didn't mean to wake you."

She put her arms around the badly beaten and shaking teen to comfort him for a few minutes until additional help arrived.

A minute later she heard a voice down the hallway, "Vernon?"

Just then, a scared looking Petunia Dursley entered the room, holding a smallbore rifle.

Instantly, Amelia shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

Bang! The old rifle went off as it hit the floor.

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For the first time in a dozen years, the creature once known as Tom Riddle drew a breath. He took stock of himself for a moment. He had small hands, thin arms and spindly legs. In all honesty, he doubted that he could stand.

Hunger. He knew hunger and he felt it at this time. He turned his head, and saw the pitiful excuse of a wizard who admittedly had helped him. Lord Voldemort rewarded those who assisted him, but at the present time, he needed much and had little to offer.

He tried his voice. It was raspy, and high pitched, but it worked.

“Wormtail, come closer so that I can see you.”

Trembling, Pettigrew asked, “Master, is it really you?”

“Of course, fool.”

In a small voice, Pettigrew asked, “How may I serve you?”

“My wand, Wormtail. What became of my wand?”

The feeble excuse for a wizard replied, “I don’t know, Master.” The balding man gave a shiver of fear, before adding, “But I have a spare.”

“Very good, Wormtail. Bring them to me.”

Pettigrew complied, setting both wands at the small creature’s feet.

“Good. Leave them and milk Nagini. One full teaspoon of venom mixed with an ounce of milk will do fine. Quickly now, I’m hungry. Be back within an hour.”

Fearing the worst, Pettigrew commented, “But Master, the nearest town is several miles away.”

“Are you a wizard Wormtail, or merely food for Nagini? Apparate there and come back. Do not be seen. Go.”

When Pettigrew had gone, Voldemort reached down and touched the wand that the timid wizard had been using. It had no special feel to him whatsoever. Momentarily worried that he'd lost his magic, he paused for a full minute before grasping the other wand. He recognized the sensation running up his arm. By touch alone, he knew that the wand was nowhere near a perfect fit, and at ten inches, was nearly like a long sword in proportion to the size of his rudimentary body, but he knew that he could do magic with the wand.

... --- ...

“Stupefy, Incarcerous!”

Amelia looked in horror at Harry, who was bleeding profusely from the neck.

Pop! Pop!

Connie and a mediwitch Amelia knew had arrived outside. Amelia cast Lumos, lighting up the room, all the while holding her hand over Harry's bleeding neck. Seconds later the newcomers were in the little bedroom, and the mediwitch began treating Harry. “What happened?” she asked.

“Harry's uncle was beating him. He called me for help. I arrived as Dursley was kicking him. I stunned Dursley and called you two. His aunt came in a few seconds later. I disarmed her and the rifle somehow fired, hitting Harry.”

The mediwitch shook her head and replied, “The boy wasn't actually shot. It looks like he was hit in the neck from a fragment of the bullet and some flying glass. I'll have the bleeding stopped in a minute. How did he break his arm?”

“When I got here his uncle was kicking him. Harry was curled up, protecting his head.”



Connie asked, "What can I do to help?"

Eyes still focused on Harry as he was being treated, Amelia replied, "Take the usual set of photos of Harry before we move him, and bring this lump of shite to the holding cells after you come back. We can keep him there a month without charging him. He's a bad egg. Please come back and bring Anna for a full investigative workup that will hold up for chronic child abuse. There is a cupboard under the stairway that needs to be photographed and tested for traces of blood. The woman can keep for a while. Take the rifle in as evidence after it gets photographed in situ. Be careful, it's most likely still loaded. I'd like you and Anna back at Welshpool in three hours. We have a lot to discuss."

Connie nodded, took the spare investigative camera out of her crash bag, and took a half dozen photos before leaving to go retrieve her investigative partner.

The mediwitch gave Harry a unit of blood restorative potion, and then healed his broken forearm. She gently brushed her fingers across the boy's forehead to comfort him and gasped as she noticed the scar.

Amelia looked at the mediwitch who had finished treating Harry and replied, "Sandy, I know that you'll need to file your report, but this one has to be written up as a Joe Bloggs. I don't want his name getting out just yet. I'll need a copy delivered personally to my office by the end of the day."

The mediwitch protested, "But this is..."

Amelia insisted, "Joe Bloggs. Just an unidentified teen, who was assaulted. I'm sorry, but it has to be this way for now. Please do a complete medical history scan on him and bill my department. Again, I'll need the report by the end of the day." She had to get a handle on the exact terms of his parents' will and get a second opinion regarding a term that had been used.

Connie arrived back with her investigative partner. Anna Daily seemingly was as opposite a person from Connie as two women who worked together everyday could be. Whereas Connie was as solidly

built a woman as you could get – really a female version of Alastor Moody at about seventy years of age, Anna was thin, attractive, feminine, and about half of her age. They had worked together for almost fifteen years, when it had become obvious that Daily would be a much better investigator than street auror.

Connie had been an auror for ten years before switching to the investigative division while she still had all of her body parts. During that time, she had been in her share of fights, and had always managed to come out on top. Both women had a remarkable eye for detail and were skilled at writing timely, accurate and descriptive reports. Anna was particularly skilled at photographing the important details of a crime scene, even if they didn't appear to be at the time.

Like Amelia, Connie was from a solid line of working-class wizarding families. Nearly half of their family members for generations back had been ministry employees. They had earned their money rather than inherited or stolen it.

Anna methodically documented the different aspects of the little room, the bullet hole, the expended cartridge and the rifle. She took photographs of the little bed, both before and after it had been repaired. Her skilled eyes noticed the loose floorboard, and lifted it up, revealing a small pile of galleons and some muggle currency. She took a photograph, and carefully replaced it. She photographed the pathetic clothing in the crate that served as Harry's closet.

Seeing as Sandy the mediwitch was done with Harry, Amelia knelt down and suggested, "Harry, I'd like you to come stay at my home for a while. Would that be okay?"

Harry nodded his head, unsure what to say to an offer to get him away from people who so obviously didn't want him around. He'd temporarily forgotten why he'd called her to begin with.

She gathered Harry's trunk and the contents of his secret hiding place, shrunk them and was ready to go, just as a Ministry owl came in carrying a notification that magic had been detected at his residence. Bones quickly read it. The note, from Mafalda Hopkirk, went on to suggest that if he was under attack, he should send an owl

to the Ministry requesting assistance. If he was not under attack, he would have to attend a hearing regarding unauthorized use of magic in a muggle residence, performed by an underage wizard. The said hearing was scheduled at Hopkirk's office that afternoon at one PM. Finally, if he was too injured to respond, he should notify her office of the circumstances at his earliest convenience, and to have a nice day.

She pocketed the note, and told Harry, "It's from the Ministry. I'll handle it. Are you ready to go?"

Harry replied, "Yes, please."

She took hold of his uninjured arm and walked him down the stairs, hoping that he wouldn't have to return to such a wretched home anytime soon. As they reappeared in her back garden, Harry commented, "I'm sorry for bothering you so early."

She replied, "You're never a bother, Harry. Let's go in and get something to eat. Smidgen will be happy to prepare a room for you." It was still before six, and Susan wasn't up yet, so they sat at the kitchen table having a cup of tea together. Amelia waited a few minutes until he had settled in and asked, "What happened, Harry?"

The distraught teen replied, "I was having a vision. Wait, that's why I called you. Where's your pensieve? This is important. Actually, maybe Mr. Scrimgeour, er, just Rufus should come too."

Given that the unpretentious teen had been embarrassingly modest about his exploits from the memories that he'd shown her last night, she had no doubt of the significance of the current set if he claimed that they 'were important.' She replied, "Just a minute. I'll be right back."

She returned, and Harry pulled a black strand from his temple and placed it in the bowl. When he finished, Harry added, "I need to warn you, it's pretty scary." He paused for a minute, and said, "Actually, if you don't mind, I have another one to show you first."

Amelia nodded, and replied, "Anna and Connie along with just Rufus should be here in a minute. Should I wait for them?" She smiled to herself at the new nickname that her longtime coworker had acquired.

"I suppose."

"Let's get something to eat, first. What do you enjoy for breakfast?"

Having never been asked in his life what he'd like for breakfast, Harry wasn't certain how to respond. He suggested, "Whatever you're having will be fine. What does Susan like for breakfast?"

Amelia smiled as she thought of his consideration for others and replied, "Almost anything. How about porridge with brown sugar and a few strips of bacon? Juice?"

"Perfect, please, thank you. What can I...Sorry, I forgot that Smidgen makes the food. Sorry."

She looked the teen in the eye, and replied, "Harry, from what I've seen, you have nothing to apologize about. Now, we got sidetracked before. Why did your uncle hurt you?"

"I'd gotten sick in my room and bumped Hedwig's stand when I went to clean it up."

Just then Harry's snowy owl flew through the open window and landed on Harry's shoulder. Harry's face lit up at the sight of his companion.

Amelia pressed, "Harry, how many times has he hurt you before?"

Harry had a thoughtful look on his face for nearly a minute before replying, "If you count the times where he either encouraged or allowed his whale of a son to go after me, fairly often, probably weekly for eight years or so. If you count the times that he physically hurt me himself, only a handful. To be honest, it was more the things that they'd say that hurt the most. Looking up, he saw the tear leak down the kindly woman's face and said, "I didn't mean to make you cry."

Amelia felt better just over his concern and suggested, "Harry, we'll never get anywhere if we keep apologizing to each other every five minutes. Let's limit them to once a day, each, okay?"

Susan came down, with barely one eye open, wearing an old nightshirt. She plopped down on one of the vacant chairs before she realized that Harry was there. After a brief mental check of what she was wearing to make sure she was decent, and wanting to avoid sticking her foot in her mouth again she smiled and asked, "Back for more of Smidgen's world famous food?"

Amelia was quick to intervene and suggested, "I asked Harry to come stay with us for a while. Things weren't working out so well with his aunt and uncle." She was quick to see the hint of a smile creep onto Susie's face before the girl worked hard to mask it and asked, "You and Hannah wouldn't mind keeping Harry company for the rest of the summer, would you?"

Susan's smile grew and she replied, "I'm sure that we can keep Harry from getting bored. We can..."

"Hi again, Good morning, Hi Susie, Just Harry." Anna, Connie and Rufus arrived and gave their respective greetings.

"Did Connie fill you in from this morning?" asked Amelia.

"Not a word," replied Scrimgeour. "Just that we needed to be here."

Harry spoke up, "I saw something that you should know about and ..."

Amelia added, "Harry was assaulted and shot at this morning."

Scrimgeour watched Harry carefully to get the measure of him as Amelia explained what had happened. While highly skilled for his age, the boy obviously needed a few lessons in unarmed self-defense, probably the girl too if he was going to be around her. He'd talk with them after the meeting.

“... and Harry had two more things to show us.” Amelia gave Harry a meaningful look and glanced at Susan.

Harry replied, “I told Susan about the first one, and I’d have told her the second, except it just happened.”

Connie’s suspicions were confirmed when she watched the memory of Tom Riddle do battle with Harry over little Ginny Weasley. She let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding when Harry stabbed the diary, killing the activated horcrux. She wondered how many more had that monster of a man made?

Anna marveled at the huge basilisk and wondered what Harry had done with it. She was certain that it would fetch several hundred thousand galleons. Having slain the beast, it was rightfully his.

Rufus marveled at the lad’s quick thinking and innate self-defense skills. He only wished that the majority of the aurors who worked for him possessed even half of the situational awareness that the young man had demonstrated.

... --- ...

Back at Hogwarts, a frown grew over Dumbledore’s lined face as he examined the ward monitor that was measuring the ancient blood ward protecting Privet Drive. Whereas it had inexplicably weakened just before the school year ended, the old professor was surprised that it hadn’t strengthened now that Harry was back living with his relatives. Instead it had steadily declined and had all but vanished this morning.

He decided to check with Molly and Arabella to see if they had received any communication from Harry or noticed anything unusual in the last few days.

... --- ...

“No child alive ever had a face like that!” exclaimed Anna after she saw the hideous image emerge in Harry’s pensieve memory. She ran out of the house and was violently sick.

"Are you sure that wasn't just a nightmare?" suggested Scrimgeour in as gentle a voice as the old Scot could muster.

"No, sir. I'm sure of it," replied Harry.

"How did Pettigrew get Romilda Vane's wand?" inquired Susan, holding Harry's shoulder. It had that funny red mark at the end of the handle."

"He must have stolen them the night he escaped," suggested Amelia. She recalled reading a report about two stolen wands from the school.

"Whose wand?" inquired Harry. He hadn't heard that several girls had their wands and money stolen at the end of the school year.

"Two first year girls from Gryffindor house. There were some thefts reported at the end of the school year. Pettigrew must have stolen them right before he disappeared. You were probably too busy to have heard about them."

"Where and when did that vision come from?" asked Connie.

"I had it early this morning," replied Harry. "I assume it was real time. I don't know where they were. Sorry."

"Harry," admonished Amelia in as gentle a manner as the woman long used to directing aurors could manage. "We are profoundly grateful for the two memories that you were able to share with us. Don't be sorry. Susan, could you help Harry get unpacked and maybe have a morning swim? Harry and I need to go to the Ministry after lunch."

"I was going to..." replied Susan before she saw the look on her aunt's face.

Harry softly suggested, "If you have plans today, I can do some reading instead. I don't want to be a bother."

"It's still early," Susan quickly decided, realizing the opportunity she was being handed. She had a conservative two-piece that she would try out this time, hoping that Harry would notice and be pleased with what he'd see. She suggested, "I'll help you get unpacked, and I can go see Hannah while you're in London."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Aqua-man."

"Mermaid."

... --- ...

As soon as the two teenagers reached the top of the stairs and were out of earshot, Amelia told her three colleagues, "We've got a lot of work to do. Sooner or later, we'll be going to war. In the meanwhile, we need to have an ironclad case ready made in our back pocket to get Harry Potter away from those dreadful relatives of his."

As the morning went on, the three made their plans.

... --- ...

Generally speaking, Albus Dumbledore enjoyed his visits to the Ministry. Almost everyone that he'd see had been a student of his at one time or another and not only was it fun to see his former students again, but by projecting his grandfatherly headmaster image, he was generally able to assert his influence over people, and have them see the wisdom of his ways with a minimum of discussion. But of all the people he would have expected to see wandering around the Ministry lobby that afternoon, Harry Potter was at the bottom of the list.

He walked up to the boy who was sitting quietly at the edge of the Fountain of Magical Brethren and greeted him, "Good afternoon, Harry. How are you today?"

"Fine, sir, and you?"



"Splendid my boy. I would have expected you to be at your home, helping your aunt and uncle around the house, not sitting here at the stuffy Ministry building."

"I have no home, sir. My aunt shot me and my uncle was taken away for beating me again. I'm currently staying with Susan Bones and her aunt."

For one of the very few times in his life, Albus Percival Wolfric Brian Dumbledore was speechless. He couldn't hide the level of abuses that the boy had described, and Harry's statement that he had no home would destroy the wards that he'd placed on Privet Drive once and for all. That said, the Bones residence was as safe a place as he could think of for the boy, at least in the short-term. He replied, "I'm sorry to hear that your aunt and uncle stepped up their level of intolerance of your existence Harry. I had truly hoped that they would have come to see you for the fine young man that you've grown to be."

Amelia wasn't sure where Dumbledore was going in his increasingly long-winded diatribe, but as she was standing right behind him, she let him go.

"Long term, I'll have to find another safe place for you to stay, should your aunt and uncle not see the error of their ways and allow you to return there."

Amelia had heard enough of the old man's blathering. She announced, "It is my professional opinion, Headmaster, that suffering twelve years of increasing abuse at the hands of that horrible family is quite enough!" Casting a silencing charm around them, she continued, "Vernon Dursley is currently in custody awaiting multiple counts of assault charges, and Petunia Dursley could be charged with gross neglect and attempted murder at any time."

Dumbledore was ready to offer his rebuttal, but it was evident that the woman was on a roll.

"It is quite evident that you or your staff were aware of the abuses that Harry has been subjected to over the years. The fact that he was

illegally placed there is merely compounded by the fact that there was every physical evidence that he was in an unsupervised, unhealthy environment. Should I elect to examine his primary school records and find evidence of a cover up of abuses, I will be a very unhappy woman.”

Dumbledore gave up on the idea of returning Harry to Privet Drive. Perhaps that would satisfy Amelia. She could be so feisty at times.

But the feisty witch was far from through. She continued, “Further, his parents’ will plainly lists his requested guardians and the will clearly uses the legal term “and their successors.” As the legal successor to Edgar and Rachel, I have applied for, and been granted permanent guardianship of Harry, pending explaining options to him and his signature of approval.”

Dumbledore admitted to himself that he had overstepped his authority and bent more than a few rules to place Harry with the Dursleys. He hoped that she didn’t investigate the 20,000 galleons that he’d withdrawn from Harry’s trust fund for payments that he’d had to make to Vernon and Petunia to get them to accept his suggestion to take him in help fund Harry’s care over the years.

“Finally, I’m told that there is a recording of a prophecy that Harry is eligible to hear at his leisure. Have you mentioned it to him when he was eleven years old as the law requires and the records specifically indicate that you were responsible for doing?” Seeing the look of guilt on his face, she admonished, “I suspected as much. Go run your school, Headmaster.”

In his best grandfatherly voice, he replied, “I was just on my way, Amelia. Harry, do enjoy the rest of your summer and be certain to write your friends when you can.” He hurried off as quickly as decorum would allow. He had to go see Mrs. Figg, stop by and see Petunia and perhaps go check in with Molly should Harry’s stay at Amelia’s not go as well as she hoped.

He had hoped to tell the prophecy to Harry himself, and if possible, would still arrange it. Hearing it in the presence of a stranger like

Amelia Bones would not sit well with the boy, who needed to hear his explanation for deferring telling him until the time was right.

... --- ...

“...And I never want to see his or your face darken my door again. Is there any part of what I’ve said for the last five minutes that’s unclear, Headmaster?”

“No, Mrs. Dursley. You’ve made your position quite clear.” The quick glance around the house that Harry’s aunt allowed him was more than sufficient to realize that Amelia was not overstating the abuses that Harry had suffered through. He could also sense the scanning charms that had been used. Obviously Amelia had called in the investigators who wouldn’t have missed a thing.

He went back to his office to contemplate Arabella’s claims that the boy had suffered years of abuse at the hands of Harry’s cousin and neglect from his aunt and uncle. In every sense, he had failed the boy.

... --- ...

“I understand Director Bones, and I apologize, Mr. Potter. We had no way of knowing that Ministry officials were doing the spellwork that we sensed at your home.”

“Mafalda,” Bones said with as much patience as she could muster, “The spellwork cast was clearly defensive in nature. Wouldn’t it have made a bit more sense to have come to Harry’s uncle’s home and see for yourself what was happening, and find out if you could assist him as opposed to sending an owl?”

Hopkirk protested, “But our charter...”

“Needs to be revised. Should you work on it, or should I?” No one would be served by sending an owl to a house that was being attacked by Death Eaters. She was becoming increasingly aware that every step would be a struggle in a Fudge administration. Why Crouch had taken on Fudge’s niece for this position was a mystery to her.

In a calmer voice, Amelia added, "My sense is that the pendulum is swinging back toward a darker, more dangerous world. I'd like you to at least consider how your team might be able to use the sophisticated magical sensing equipment that you have in place to help make Britain a safer place. Let's talk again in a month."

... --- ...

Monday 4 July

Becky Abbott was only slightly surprised when Amelia had requested that Harry Potter and two aurors be added to Susan's birthday party guest list. Her daughter Hannah had mentioned that Susan and Harry had struck up a friendship of some sort, and the extra protection was always welcome.

She had an early dinner planned which would make it much easier for the working parents to attend. The guests began arriving at 5:30 and by 6:15 everyone had arrived.

The Abbotts lived on the beach in Folkestone, a small village on the southern end of the island. Most of the guests had either apparated or taken the floo. One of Susan's classmates who Becky didn't know had taken the Knight Bus.

Becky had helped raise Susan and had acted as Susan's unofficial guardian when, from her lifelong friend Rachel Bones' wishes, Susan and Hannah went to muggle primary school together. Obviously Susan really lived with Amelia, but they couldn't otherwise explain how two little girls living some two hundred miles apart were attending the same primary school. The friendship continued when they started Hogwarts, and Becky had been pleased that both girls had been sorted into the same House.

Ben worked at a wizarding law firm that specialized in cross-boundary business transactions between magicals and non-magicals. He was good at it and had provided well for his little family.

... --- ...

Professor Pomona Sprout was honored to have been invited to Susan's birthday party. Most of the other adults in attendance were high ranking Ministry officials or the younger up and coming business people. She and Poppy Pomfrey were the only two from Hogwarts to have received invitations. The sound of the ocean against the shore was very relaxing. She noticed with pride that Susan hadn't made her birthday an all Hufflepuff affair. There were three students from Gryffindor and two from Ravenclaw as well as a handful of students from her own house. She enjoyed the kabobs that Ben had grilled as well as all of the lovely food that Becky had prepared.

Susan took the time to introduce Harry to their classmates he didn't already know. Her fellow Hufflepuffs were unable to hide their surprise at his appearance at their housemate's party. As far as they were aware, Susan hardly knew him a month ago. After a while, though, these thoughts were forgotten as the students enjoyed the warm sunny day and ocean breezes.

Poppy Pomfrey wasn't having nearly as much fun. Amelia's request to talk with her for 'a few minutes' was feeling more and more like the interrogation that she had long expected would come one day regarding the medical condition of Harry James Potter.

"I really wasn't in much of a position to mention his condition to his guardians."

Amelia was getting more frustrated by the minute. She replied, "For heaven's sake, Poppy, I'm trying to avoid recusing myself and handing this over to the investigators. You must have examined him in his second year when that blowhard Lockhart vanished the bones in his arm. He's had three defensive position fractures in his right arm alone. Given how thin and short he is now, he must have been skin and bone when he first started school. How many nights has he spent in your care?"

"Sixteen so far, and I did mention his general condition to Professor Dumbledore on two different occasions. He didn't want me to contact the muggle authorities."

Amelia softened her tone a bit and replied, "That's an area where the muggles are far more insightful than we are. They require that suspected child abuse gets reported to the proper investigative authorities."

"Professor Dumbledore is head of the Wizengamot, what more authority would you want?"

Her lifelong friend observed, "Maybe he's wearing too many hats to do any of his jobs effectively. Guarding a magical object in a school, exposing hundreds of children to significant danger. Where's his check and balance?"

To that question, Poppy could only nod in agreement. She too had been opposed to hiding Flamel's stone in the castle. She added, "Since Harry's circumstances have changed, I'd be more than happy to prescribe nutrient and growth potion. Professor Dumbledore said that his muggle guardians had no interest in approving or funding optional medications for him."

"For the love of Merlin, Poppy. You knew the Potters; James and his parents had vaults full of gold. Are you telling me that Harry is a good two stone lighter and five inches shorter than he should be over fifty galleons?"

Poppy hung her head in shame. She knew that her lifelong friend was right.

Amelia took a deep breath and asked herself, "What else is that man going to bungle?"

Somehow the two witches knew that they wouldn't have to wait very long to find out.

oc-OC-oc

Something had been niggling at the old scribe for years now. He had discussed this issue with his fellow scribes on several occasions, but they had never arrived at a definitive answer to the question – Who

had accompanied Riddle into the Potter's house on that fateful night in 1981?

Given the evidence that the professor gave us about simply writing the address to Grimwald Place on a slip of parchment, it is not certain that Pettigrew accompanied the Dark Lord to Godric's Hallow. There was no evidence in her record, thus the old scribe concluded that Peter (the coward) would not elect to accompany Riddle and be forced to witness his former friends' deaths.

After much thought, Crow could only conclude that the wand was on the floor within feet of Lily. Someone (Black, Hagrid or Dumbledore) found Harry there, and would have had the opportunity to pick up the wand, since it obviously wasn't destroyed. Hagrid and Black were at the home, allowing Hagrid to get Black's motorbike. The scribe was forced to conjecture that the wand would be on display somewhere, and wondered why no one noticed that it had been stolen in all of book four. Obviously there had been a cover-up, as the old scribe would describe in an upcoming report.

Given the graveyard scene, where Pettigrew obviously used Riddle's wand to kill Cedric, it is reasonable to presume that when confronted by Black, Pettigrew dropped his own wand after blasting the hole in the street, providing more physical evidence pointing to Black, so he needed to steal the Vane girl's wand after the Shrieking Shack incident.

Finally, Crow and his fellow scribes had quaffed many butterbeers pondering Nagini, and had concluded that she was known by Riddle prior to 1981, and had been placed in the relative safety (from wizardkind) of one of the large forests of Albania. She wouldn't have been native to Albania, and baby Riddle or spirit Riddle would not have been in a position to charm her into her present size.

If any of the other scribes wish to rationally debate the issue further (and are buying the butterbeer) Crow knew that he would be more than willing to hear their ideas.

Editor's note – by Chem Prof – My interpretation of canon has always been that Voldemort intended to use Harry's death to make his final

Horcrux at Godric's Hollow, and therefore would have been one short when he came back in book four (at least he thought he was). But Old Crow's argument about Nagini's size is very compelling. Nagini must have been Voldemort's familiar at least, if not a Horcrux, before he came back from Albania.



## Chapter Five

### Another cover-up

Thursday 7 July

Peter Pettigrew grumbled to himself as he was sent back to the little village to get another bottle of milk. True, his master was gaining strength each day, but Pettigrew could see that it would be a long haul getting the Dark Lord back to full strength. Pettigrew felt guilty stealing the toddler from that young woman, before killing her. He didn't enjoy killing, but his master required a toddler about that age, and the woman had put up a terrible fight to protect her child.

Voldemort had said little to him since emerging from the cauldron. He probably had been assessing the situation and planning his next moves, limited as his options were.

Pettigrew was too lost in his own thoughts to notice that he'd accidentally bumped into a woman, knocking her into the street. Instinctively he helped her up and was horribly surprised when she asked, "Peter?"

Pettigrew panicked, and stunned the woman, and hid her behind a trash can. He hurriedly made his way to the grocery store where he purchased another half-gallon of milk. Not having a better idea, he disillusioned the unconscious woman as best as he could and levitated her body, slowly making her way back to the Dark Lord waiting several miles into the forest.

... --- ...

At the same time that Pettigrew was dragging the girl back into the forest, Amelia had arranged to talk with Harry. She had asked Becky Abbott to invite Susie to spend the evening at the beach house, enabling her to have an uninterrupted discussion with Harry.

They had finished a late dinner and Amelia began the discussion that she had rehearsed several times over the course of the afternoon. "Harry, you've had a much less pleasant childhood and upbringing

than you or any young person would deserve. I want you to understand that no one, not Professor Dumbledore, not anyone from the Ministry nor anyone from the wizarding world would have intentionally placed you in such an unloving home."

"Why then?"

Not one to lie, or sugarcoat the truth, she replied, "Professor Dumbledore placed you there against your parents' stated wishes. Apparently he had his reasons and at some level they were probably focused on your safety. It simply never occurred to him that while you might have been afforded some outside protection while living there, you had no protections from within."

"What will happen to me now?"

She looked him in the eyes for a few seconds and suggested, "What I'd like to have happen Harry is for you to make our home in Welshpool here your home." She unrolled the parchment that was the copy of his parents' will and showed him the guardianship section.

After he had reviewed the section of the document that she had pointed to, Amelia observed, "Harry, Sirius simply isn't in a position to become your guardian, nor in all honesty is he likely to in the near future. Edgar and Rachel were killed, and the Longbottoms will never be in a position to help anyone. However, as Edgar's successor, I was blessed with the opportunity to become Susan's guardian." She saw the hopeful look in Harry's eye as he made the connection, and didn't keep him waiting.

"If you would allow me the honor, Harry, I would like you to consider having me as your guardian."

For a moment, Harry sat there expressionless, almost as if he'd been stunned. Though he'd have a hard time selecting the appropriate words, in matters of family, Harry had grown up learning little about self-esteem. The concept that someone would actually want him was out at the very fringe of his comprehension. He wanted to call Hermione, to tell her the news, and get her opinion. He wanted to hug Susan...

Amelia carefully watched the expression on Harry's face without appearing to stare. A neutral expression turned into a grin and after a half minute a frown crept onto his face. She asked, "What's on your mind, Harry?"

Harry mumbled, "Susan."

Amelia let out a laugh and replied, "I'm certain that she'd be delighted to hear that, especially when you were smiling. So what caused the frown?"

"Would she be my sister?"

Amelia was not so old that she couldn't remember the sometimes incomprehensible thought process of teenagers. She smiled and replied, "No, Harry. Susie will likely be many things in your life, but she'll never be your sister. You two might decide to be teenage friends, or lifelong pals, boyfriend and girlfriend if that were ever to suit the both of you someday, or whatever you two might want to be. My becoming your guardian, should you wish it, wouldn't change any of those things, or close any doors for you. Does that make sense?"

Harry thought for a moment, and nodded. He asked, "Would it be okay if I called Hermione before I gave you an answer?"

Amelia smiled at his choice, and replied, "Of course. I want you to think this over, since it's an important step. Why don't you call her, or whoever you'd like and we can talk about it more tomorrow at breakfast. I'm certain that you'll have some questions that we should discuss. Goodnight, Harry."

... --- ...

The high raspy voice demanded answers, "Why are you late, you poor excuse of a wizard? You're over an hour late. Who is that with you?"

"Master, I was recognized when I went into the village. I didn't know what to do, so I stunned her and brought her back here. Perhaps she could be of some use to us."

"Don't lie to me. Finding her was an accident that you should have avoided if you'd been paying the least amount of attention. Who is she? Cast some light by me so we can see her better." The woman was fairly attractive, and appeared to be in her late 30s. Pettigrew brushed his hand against her blouse as he moved her hair out of the way.

"Bertha?"

There was no response, as she was still unconscious.

Voldemort hissed, "Do you know this woman?"

"Master, she is a witch. Her name is Bertha Jorkins."

"Set her right by me. Search her thoroughly then put some ropes around her so she can't escape. Gag her too. We don't want to be found."

Pettigrew checked and rechecked every inch of her body and found a wand holster on her thigh. He slowly removed the wand holster and gazed for several seconds at her exposed knickers.

"Hurry up, Wormtail. You can look at her later if it suits me. Check her bag and wake her after you have bound and gagged her."

Pettigrew carefully looked through her bag, and found nearly a hundred galleons and a similar amount of currency in a variety of British, French, and Albanian notes. He also found her newly issued Ministry ID card, which indicated that she worked in the department of games and sports. He told his master what he'd found; ending the announcement with, "She must have changed positions recently. She has a new ID card, but she joined the Ministry when I was still in school."

... --- ...

“Grangers, Hermione speaking. Oh, hi, Harry. It’s a bit late. What’s wrong?”

For thirty minutes, Harry explained his hopes and fears to the friend who had always listened to him. He admitted what had happened at the Dursleys over the years. Finally he brought up his fear that Sirius would hate him for choosing someone else to become his guardian.

Hermione thought about his words for a moment and replied, “I don’t think he’d mind, Harry. I’m certain that he loves you and wants the best for you. Right now, what’s best for you is to have a happy, safe home. In all honesty, Sirius isn’t in a position to give that to you right now. If things work out and he gets his name cleared, I’m sure that you could still go visit him and get to know him better without hurting Director Bones’ feelings.”

“Should I send him an owl?”

Hermione thought for a moment and suggested, “Maybe it would be better if you waited until he sent you a bird next. Parrots aren’t native anywhere near here, and Hedwig would probably be gone for quite a long time if you used her.”

Harry thought about her words, but didn’t say anything. To break the silence, Hermione suggested, “When you do write him, maybe you should ask if he could get a cell phone. Yours is working out well, and he’d probably like to hear your voice again.”

Harry liked that idea and recapped their conversation, “So you think it would be okay living here, away from Privet Drive?”

Hermione sighed, “Oh Harry, you’d be safe and away from those horrible people. You’ll get to spend the rest of the summer paddling around in a pool with Susan to keep you company. You can come over here and visit whenever you want to, and both of us will help you study. Sleep on it and call again tomorrow if you still want to talk. Goodnight, Harry.”

“Thanks, Hermione. Goodnight.”

... --- ...

Before losing his body to the Potter boy in 1981, Lord Voldemort was, by any measure, a master legilimens. He had surprised himself that to a degree, he was able to continue the practice while in spirit form. Now that he had a semblance of a body, his magic was both easier to use, but much weaker. The few spells that he'd cast with the overly large wand that was at best an adequate fit had tired him after casting them. To some extent his magical core was tied to that of a fourteen-month-old body. As such, he picked up the wand, pointed it at Jorkins and cast "Legilimens."

He slowly sifted through her memories starting with the most recent and working his way backwards. She had apparently been bound for Australia and somehow ended up in Albania. In her job, she was making some of the logistical arrangements for the Quidditch World Cup, which apparently was being held in Wales in a little over a month.

After about five minutes of excruciatingly slow progress, Voldemort was exhausted. He needed be fed and to rest for at least a few hours before attempting another look into her memories.

"You may examine her as you wish for a few minutes after you feed me, Wormtail. Do not damage her in any way. She may yet be useful to us."

... --- ...

Friday 8 July

Harry was in a much better mood when he woke up. Hermione's words about Sirius had eliminated his final hesitations regarding having Amelia become his guardian. Always something of an early riser, he was at the table when Amelia walked in and asked, "Good morning, Harry. Did you sleep well?"

He replied, "Yes... Amelia, thank you. You?"

Smiling, she commented, "Wonderful. Thanks. What would you like for breakfast?"

Harry began with his standard reply, "Anything's fine. Whatever you'd like." Then he added, "If you still would have me, I'm ready to sign the papers that we'd talked about."

She cracked a great smile and her eyes lit up to match. She replied, "That's very good. We can bring them into the Ministry together to sign, and I'd like to take you to the Hall of Prophecies within the Department of Mysteries. You can bring your prophecy home and listen to it here whenever you're comfortable doing so."

"But what if it's something horrible?"

"We'll manage. Family always does." She gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze and he smiled appreciatively, tears welling in his eyes. After they had eaten, the three of them went to the Ministry and signed the guardianship papers. It didn't take long and Amelia promised, "Harry, I'll do everything that I can to make certain that you have the teenage years that you should. I'll do everything I can to make certain that you and Susie are safe, and I promise that I'll provide you a loving home. Welcome to the family."

They went back to the elevator and went down to the ninth level. By virtue of Amelia's identification card, they easily made their way through the Department of Mysteries where their ancient escort took them down several long, dimly lit corridors and opened a locked door. Once inside he announced, "Welcome to the Hall of Prophecies."

She replied, "Thank you, Mr. Croaker. That will be all."

As the old wizard stood back a respectful distance, Amelia looked through the record book and wrote the name, Harry Potter onto the ledger. A few seconds later, the thick ledger opened itself to a page dated 4 February 1980.

Harry asked, "If these are all so important, how come they aren't guarded or being studied, or something?" Susan nodded her head, as the same question was on her mind too.

Amelia replied, "They are charmed so that only the people who they are about can lift them off of the racks." She read through the book until she saw what she was looking for – Row 93 Section 11 Rack 6. She carefully examined the inscription and read, S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D – Dark Lord and (?) Harry Potter.

Apparently Sybil Trelawney made the prophecy in Dumbledore's presence sometime early in 1980 and it was later concluded that Harry was the unnamed subject that she had referenced in connection to Tom Riddle.

Susie broke the uncomfortable silence by asking, "If all of these are marked like Harry's is, why don't they all get collected?"

Amelia replied, "In this area, I find myself in complete agreement with your head of house, Harry. Most of these are so vague as to be completely useless and indecipherable until after the fact."

The two teens looked at her questioningly and she added, "Consider the other one that she made. It was so vague that it only made the least bit of sense after everything had already happened. There was no way that you could have known what it was referring to."

Harry and Susan nodded in understanding, but didn't say anything.

Amelia suggested, "Let's go home and have lunch. We'll look at this together, if you'd like and discuss your class schedules for the next term. It's possible that you both would like to make some changes for the coming term."

As the left, the prophecy log was magically updated to read – Prophecy picked up unopened by Harry Potter – 8 July 1994.

... --- ...

Lunch was a quiet affair that afternoon at the Bones household. It was obvious that there was an elephant in the room, but no one spoke of it. Susan asked, "Would you like to go swimming this afternoon, Harry?"



Finally he replied, "No Thanks. We might as well find out what else that old bat had to say about Tom and Harry."

Amelia stifled a laugh. There wasn't anyone in the Ministry who had been so directly affected by, or carried such a casual attitude about that sadistic killer as Harry Potter. Yet of all of the people that she knew, the messy haired teen had earned the right to feel that way. She couldn't imagine anyone else in Britain calling him by his first name.

Harry asked, "What do I do?"

Amelia replied, "If you don't want to get shards of glass all around the house, I suggest throwing it into the fireplace to smash it."

Harry did as she asked and a moment later they heard the ethereal voice of a somewhat younger version of Sybil. All in all, it looked like the hologram scene from the movie Star Wars that Susan and Harry had seen at Hermione's house the other day.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

After a moment, Amelia muttered, "Someone else must have heard it, or at least part of it."

Susan, who had been lost in her own thoughts asked, "What do you mean, Auntie?"

Amelia replied, "One of Voldemort's Death Eaters must have heard all, or at least the first part of this prophecy as she was spewing it. The prophecy was made in February, 1980, a few months before you two were born. That spring and summer, he went on a horrible killing spree, targeting pregnant mothers and infants. That's the primary

reason that your class is so small compared to the others at school. A lot of young parents, yours included Harry, went into hiding to protect themselves.”

Anger and frustration were building in Harry. How many of his potential classmates and their parents had died because of that dingbat bint?

Amelia continued, “He must have only heard the opening words... the killing seemed so random... James and... Edgar.” She turned her attention to Harry, who was holding Susan who was silently sobbing into his shirt. Compartmentalizing her DMLE thoughts for a moment, she turned back to family matters and considered what to say.

Harry surprised her by jumping up and, announcing, “I’ll be leaving then.”

The loyal badger inside Susie must have awakened at those words. She sprang to her feet as well, grabbed his arm, pushed him back onto his chair and commanded, “Sit!”

Dumfounded, Harry complied as she ranted, “We both lost our parents to that snake faced bastard. I’ve got just as much reason to hate that freak as anyone. Trelawney couldn’t give an understandable prophecy to save her drunken arse. You don’t know if that stupid rant that she gave fourteen and a half years ago has already come to pass when you were a baby or will happen fifty years from now. Don’t let it run your life. I’ve a good mind to go find her and stick my wand straight up her...”

“Sit!” Amelia’s stern voice commanded. “While I agree with everything that you said, Susie, and can’t remember being so proud of you, we will not suffer indecent vulgarities in our home.” Smidgen brought the two teens each a butterbeer and after they had calmed down a bit, she continued. “Susie, your comment about the ambiguity of her phrasing is spot on. Harry, please consider that whether you personally believe that there is any substance to Ms. Trelawney’s words, or not, Voldemort apparently does, or at least did. The fact remains that good people were murdered over her words. This does not mean that you are alone in the world, or have been given a Letter

of Marque to go chasing after him. And from what Connie has told me; it would be premature to try to do so at this time.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes when Amelia suggested, “Harry, this is certainly your story to tell, but I’d like your permission to discuss this with Connie and just Rufus. Additionally, I recommend that the two of you don’t discuss this with anyone else until we’ve thought it through a lot more. Finally, it’s a nice day out. Why don’t the two of you go for a swim?”

The two teens didn’t have to be asked twice.

... --- ...

An hour later, Harry put down the letter that Fawkes the phoenix had just delivered. Susan glanced over at it.

Harry,

Now that you’ve heard the prophecy, you would do well to learn how to protect your thoughts and memories. There is a specialized branch of magic called occlumency. Professor Snape would be willing to offer you (both) lessons in the subject for the remainder of the summer.

I will ask him to pick two days a week for the summer and to come to the Bones estate at noon to give you both instruction on the subject.

Professor Dumbledore

Susan threw down the letter and proclaimed “There’s no way that that old perve is coming over and leering at me while he makes fun of my memories. Who does that old f...”

“Hold on,” suggested Harry. “What’s occlumency?”

“I’ve just read the basics. It’s a way of protecting your thoughts and memories so others can’t snoop through them. There’re some books on it inside. We can ask Auntie.”

They went in and briefly explained Dumbledore's idea and Amelia suggested, "Connie's partner, Anna Daily is very well versed in occlumency and she can keep a secret. While I agree with Professor Dumbledore in this case, regarding the need to protect yourselves, I wouldn't be comfortable having Severus Snape sifting through your memories. It is far easier to learn if you are working in a relaxed, trusting environment rather than an adversarial situation. I can ask her if she has time to talk with the two of you tomorrow if you like."

"Please," replied the teens. Neither of them wanted anything to do with Snape.

Harry quickly penned a reply to the headmaster.

Professor Dumbledore,

Amelia has arranged occlumency lessons for us. Thanks anyway, for the offer.

Harry and Susan

Fawkes picked up the piece of parchment and vanished in a flash of flame.

... --- ...

Sunday 10 July

A few days later, the school owls with booklists arrived as they were having breakfast. Amelia listened patiently as the two teens discussed the various classes.

Susan announced, "I'm going to drop care of magical creatures. I was expecting to learn about unicorns and fairies, like the syllabus said. Hagrid's got a monster fixation."

Harry replied, "I like Hagrid, but I know what you mean. I'm dropping divination. I can't stand that old bat predicting my death in front of the class every week. Honestly, I don't even think that's a subject that can be taught. What are you going to take instead?"

Susan replied, "I enjoy arithmancy, but I'm already taking that. I'm going to take runes instead."

Harry nodded and said, "Me too. What do we need to do to drop a class and sign up for a new one?"

Susan smiled at his choice and commented, "Professor Sprout told me that all we had to do was to make a note of the change and we can have Auntie sign for both of us. You probably just need to send yours to Professor McGonagall."

Harry replied, "That's great. We can go get our stuff in a few days. You should invite Hannah to come with."

Susan smiled at his acceptance of her chatty life-long friend and replied, "That sounds great. How about next Wednesday? Maybe Hermione would want to meet up with us?"

Harry nodded and speculated, "She probably would. She's never really had anyone to go with."

Susan suggested, "You let her know and I'll let Hannah know. We can go in the morning and stay for lunch. So why did you sign up for divination in the first place?"

"Ron was going to. I guess he thought it would be an easy class. That's a stupid reason when I think about it."

Susan admitted, "Well, it's not the best, but runes should be useful."

Amelia remarked, "They both sound like good decisions. I'll happily sign both forms. How did the occlumency lesson go with Anna yesterday?"

"Fine," they both said. Harry added, "We really learned quite a bit. She gave us each a book to read and gave us some exercises to practice too."

Susan nodded and mentioned, "I really wouldn't have wanted to practice this with Professor Snape though. He's such an unpleasant..."

"I understand," said Amelia, closing the conversation, before Susie got wound up about how nasty the potions master could be. She added, "I'll be home at six. You two have a good day."

... --- ...

After four days of exhaustive work sifting through Jorkins' memories, Voldemort came to a highly interesting conclusion. The woman had recently been obliviated! Further probing indicated that she had lost all memories for nearly a month. Naturally Riddle was very interested in the idea that a ministry employee might have stumbled upon some piece of information that was so sensitive that someone had gone to considerable effort to illegally strip it from her mind.

A dozen years ago, he could have extracted the erased memory from her in a matter of minutes. A dozen years ago, he was at full strength and possessed a wand that truly was a perfect fit. Now in the few tests that he had performed while Wormtail was out running errands, he concluded that he possessed no more than five percent of his former abilities. At this point, any serious attempt to break the memory block would kill her or leave her a vegetable. She was too valuable a resource at the present time to take such a risk.

Wormtail seemed content to continue feeding the three of them, milking Nagini to create a simple strengthening potion and groping the woman at night. As such, Voldemort kept probing, as much as his limited strength would allow.

After some additional thought, he had an idea. "Wormtail, fetch the girl's Ministry identification card."

The cowardly wizard complied and said, "Here it is, Master. What would you like to know?"

"You told me that she had worked at the Ministry for many years. What is the date on her identification card?"

“The first April of this year, Master. Is it important?”

“Perhaps, Wormtail. Perhaps...”

Riddle considered the information that he knew. Jorkins was currently working in the Department of Magical Sports. Prior to that she had worked for fifteen years in the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

There had to be a connection.

... --- ...

Connie stopped in Amelia's office for lunch, as was her habit. She inquired, “How are our favorite teenagers?”

Amelia smiled and replied, “They're fine. They were talking about adding and dropping electives this morning. Harry has had enough of prophecies and fortune telling and Susie has had her fill of Hagrid's interesting creatures. They both decided to take runes instead.”

Connie nodded and observed, “I can certainly see where he'd never want to see or hear about another prophecy as long as he lives. On a different subject, Rufus offered to give them both a few self-defense lessons this weekend. Why don't you ask them tonight and let him know what time would be best.”

Amelia replied, “Good idea. I'll do that. By the way, they both mentioned that their occlumency lesson had gone well. What did Anna say?”

Connie considered her question for a moment and replied, “They're both quite motivated to learn, they have the time to practice, they don't have a lot of distractions and they have each other. She said a few more lessons and continued practice should get them well on their way.”

Getting to the real subject, Amelia asked, “What about the Horcrux theory?”

Connie replied, "I ran into one about thirty years ago, but the owner was alive and well at the time. Something had to have been anchoring You-Know-Who's spirit. When I saw that first memory that Harry showed us, it hit me like a freight train. When he showed us the memory with him and the visage of You-Know-Who as a teenager, I was sure of it. The problem is that when I checked with Croaker from Mysteries, there has never been a documented case of someone creating multiple splits. Harry destroyed that horcrux in 1993 when he stabbed the diary with that horrible fang. If that had been the only horcrux, You-Know-Who's spirit would have evaporated or gone straight to Hell or whatever his destiny really is. Yet we know that he's still out there."

Amelia lamented, "We can't really go up to him and ask, 'How many of those devilish things did you make, you sick bastard?'"

Connie replied, "No, but we could kick his squashy face in like a football." They both knew that someone must know the answer, but that part of the puzzle hadn't made itself apparent yet. She added, "I'll get Rufus to go pay Bellatrix a visit."

Amelia replied, "That sounds good. Maybe she'll get killed trying to escape. Thanks for lunch."

Connie laughed and joked, "No worries. Your turn tomorrow."

... --- ...

Wednesday 20 July

Harry, Susan, Hannah and Hermione met in Diagon Alley in the morning. They met up at Fortescue's to plan their day.

"I need books, school robes and a dress robe. I also need to stop at Gringotts," announced Hannah.

Hermione nodded and added, "I do too. I also want to stop at the quill shop. How about you two?"



Since Harry had bought dress robes on his shopping trip with Amelia, and Susan had received new ones for her birthday, neither needed to make that stop. "Just books and a couple of gifts," replied Susan, glancing at Hermione, wondering if she would help her select a great gift for Harry.

"Books and quidditch gloves for me," added Harry.

Hannah suggested, "Hermione and I can go to Gringotts and the robe shop together, Susan and Harry can get their individual shopping done and we'll meet at Flourish and Blotts at eleven, then we can come back and get lunch."

"Sounds good."

Hermione and Hannah left the others and walked the alleyway to Gringotts. As they were walking Hannah commented, "It must be nice for Sue to have her own live-in boyfriend."

Hermione asked, "What do you mean?" She began to wonder how much Susan had told her about Harry's horrible circumstances at the Dursley's.

Hannah replied, "Sue and I were talking at her pool one afternoon just after school let out. She commented about how she liked Harry and a day or so later, he's staying there for the summer." She smirked and added, "She's been offering him private swimming lessons..." The more she went on, the more Hermione realized that any conversation with Hannah focused on Hannah doing most of the talking and the least of the listening. While it was amusing to hear her talk, Hermione realized that Susan must have told her friend next to nothing regarding Harry's personal circumstances.

After a few minutes, Hannah concluded saying, "He is getting to be good looking. Why didn't you go after him?"

Hermione shook her head and admitted, "Harry's just my best friend. I like it that way right now, and I think he does too. I'm not looking to date anyone right now, just focus on school."

“How about Ron Weasley?”

Hermione gave a little laugh and replied, “He kind of comes along with being Harry’s friend. Not to be cruel, but if I weren’t a friend with Harry, I’d have nothing in common whatsoever with Ron. He spends all of his time being a slacker and dreaming about playing a sport when he hasn’t even made the team.” A second later she asked, “Does she really like Harry?”

Hannah replied, “I think so. He doesn’t gawk at her, and her Aunt’s position doesn’t seem to faze him. She’s not wrapped up in that boy-who-lived hype and she opens up to him in terms of telling him about how she feels. Generally she’s pretty shy...”

“Did she ever tell you how Harry came to be living there?”

Hannah thought for a moment and admitted, “I guess not.” She added, “Knowing Harry Potter, it must have been something dramatic, I suppose?” Clearly she was hoping Hermione would add something juicy to the story.

Hermione replied, “His relatives were horrible to him, but that’s his story to tell.” Reaching Gringotts, she said, “I have to exchange some pound notes into galleons. I’ll wait here for you while you go to your vault.”

Several hours later, the girls had bought dress robes, and they met Susan and Harry at the bookstore. Hermione noticed Harry and Susan looking at the Runes books and asked, “Are you adding Runes as a class?”

They nodded and explained about dropping their respective classes. Hermione suggested, “Why don’t you get the second year books too? I could help you both with the first year material and you might be able to talk Professor Babbling into letting you take the second class.”

It sounded like a good idea, so they bought both sets of books. Harry also found several extra defense books, and picked up a catalogue and a gift certificate. After they had all of their packages wrapped up,

paid for and shrunk, they walked back to Fortescue's where they met Neville Longbottom. Harry suggested that he join them for lunch.

They had a wonderful lunch together. Hannah amused them with a fun little story about a seagull and a crab that she'd seen earlier that morning. Neville kept glancing at Hannah and noticed that her sky blue shirt was a perfect match for her eyes. He seemed to be taking in every detail, but his Gryffindor courage must have been hiding, as he didn't say much. Harry, Susan and Hermione noticed Neville and they silently enjoyed seeing Hannah glance back when he wasn't looking.

Finally it was almost time for dinner. They paid their bill and parted ways, each having had a wonderful day together.

... --- ...

Pettigrew contemplated the plan – go into the Ministry, look for the large display case between the Department of Magical Law Enforcement administrative offices and the Minister's administrative offices. Somehow open or break into the case, steal his master's wand, create some other type of disturbance and exit the building – all without being seen. Alternately, he could attempt to disguise the theft by destroying the contents of the case. The balding man had reason to worry. A thousand things could go wrong.

It was the riskiest plan that either of them could take. Riddle was betting all of his resources on a plan with less than a one in three chance of success

According to the information that Riddle had gleaned from Jorkins after two weeks of probing, most of the employees entered the building through the employee floo network, which required an employee card and a password. Failure to provide the current password caused the floo traveler to be routed into an alternate location. Jorkins didn't seem to know much about that, nor did she know the interval that the password was reset. One thing was certain – the longer that they waited, the more likely that the password would have already been changed.

The other possibility was to enter through the visitor entrance. It was easy enough to get to but they always had a guard at the other end. Jorkins had no memory to support an estimate of how many visitors a day would go through the visitor entrance. Voldemort considered having Wormtail wait out of sight by the phone booth and attempt to hitch a ride, unseen by the other visitor.

Once inside, Wormtail could remain hidden until the time came to raid the display cases. He assumed that the case itself was warded and would sound an alarm or even trigger a complete lockdown of the Ministry if it was broken into. As such, it would be imperative that he find a good hiding place prior to attempting to recover the wand. That would afford him the option to either attempt to dash out of the building or wait the necessary amount of time to escape undetected.

Time. That was something that they wouldn't have in abundance. He estimated that Wormtail could prepare no more than five days worth of food in advance. It would take Wormtail a minimum of 36 hours to get there, poor wizard that he was, Riddle doubted that he could apparate much more than twenty miles at a time and would require a rest in between. They were nearly 1,200 miles by air and probably closer to 1,500 miles by land from London.

Riddle didn't currently possess the magical strength to create a portkey, and he didn't want to risk Wormtail getting captured while trying to purchase one. He would have to take the ferry back to Italy, get off unseen, obtain a train ticket to Paris, make his way back to the coast by Calais, apparate across to Folkstone, and from there quickly make his way to London. The quicker that he got there, the more time that he'd have to recover his wand before he had to make his way back to Albania.

Currently, Wormtail was feeding him every six hours. He doubted that he would survive in his present body for 24 hours without a feeding. The girl could be bound or chained and feed herself.

They would need to make the necessary preparations and execute them as quickly as possible.

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Friday 22 July

The three teens sat at the umbrella picnic table with their books out. Hermione had come over to see if she could help Susan and Harry catch up to the second year class. She began, "First, let's look at the major runic alphabets (called "futharks" based upon the first six symbols). There are many other variants, but the Elder, Anglo-Saxon, and Younger Futharks are the most well-known. Runes were used to write many languages including, Danish, English, Frisian, German, Gothic, Hebrew, Icelandic, Norwegian, Lithuanian, Russian, Swedish and other Semitic languages."

"Hermione?"

The bushy hair teen turned off her lecture mode and asked, "What?"

"Is all of this covered in the first year class?" asked Susan, marveling that she'd even alphabetized her examples.

"Well, no," the academically energetic teen admitted, "but I thought that it would be interesting background information."

"It probably is," encouraged Susan. "But maybe we should just stick to the three basic futharks for today then. Harry's eyes are starting to glaze over."

The two teens laughed with their messy haired friend. They spent the rest of the afternoon studying, swimming, and just being friends.

... --- ...

Saturday 30 July

Peter Pettigrew was worried. The one place that he didn't want to get to was the one place that he had to go to. And as the saying goes, it was the one place that he seemed to be having all of the trouble getting to.

He started out badly, missed the ferry back to Italy and had to wait four hours for the next one. He had trouble selling some of his stolen Albanian notes for either French or British ones, which he had the fewest of. He got lost in Paris trying to make his way to Calais, which was the closest spot to the British coast. Not having a passport, he didn't want to risk discovery while taking the chunnel train. When he finally arrived in Calais, he was tired and afraid to try apparating to the beaches of Folkstone, which were the closest that he'd actually been to.

Once in Folkstone, he was certain that someone had heard him as he barely reappeared on the beach due to the distance. Magically, he was too tired to immediately assume his rat form to hide, so he hid under a bush for an hour and attempted to find a bus that would take him at least part of the way to London.

Three hours later, he was outside the visitor telephone booth of the Ministry, waiting for someone to enter the booth, so that he could slip in unseen.

After another two hours, he was about to give up hope when his wildest dreams were answered. Percy Weasley was going to the booth with his girlfriend Penelope Clearwater. "Come along, Penny. I have to drop these important papers from Mr. Crouch to the Department of Magical Importation regarding proposed cauldron bottom thickness standards. It won't take but a few minutes. You can wait at my desk if you wish, or I suppose you can wait in the lobby. I'll be returning directly, and then we can go get lunch."

Pettigrew took a calming breath and scurried into the phone booth, mere inches behind the girl. He winced in pain as the door shut on the tip of his tail. He wouldn't be able to comfortably sit for a week after this. Seconds later, the door opened again and the guard seemed more interested in Percy's girlfriend than in watching the floor. Staying close to the wall, Pettigrew had the double trouble of not really knowing where he was going, along with the need not to be seen or stepped on.

He made his way to a quiet place and waited for the traffic to thin out. Given the pain from his injury, the time went by at an agonizingly slow

pace. He hadn't eaten for the day and was extremely thirsty. Three PM eventually changed into three fifteen, then three thirty. Finally six came and there was a great rush of people in the hallway. Pettigrew poked his head out of his hiding place an hour and a half later and took the risky step of returning to his human form, as he couldn't see into the glass cases from the vantage point of the floor.

Ten minutes later he found the case that contained wands and other artifacts of Britain's former criminals and dark wizards. Pettigrew laughed to himself when he noticed "Mass Murderer" Sirius Black's wand on display at one end of the case. Walking down the hall to the next case, he found what he was looking for. There was a small display case containing a Death Eater mask, a timeline, and the wand belonging to "He Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." It amazed Pettigrew that the wand hadn't been snapped into pieces before being put on display.

Pettigrew examined the case. The glass looked thin enough, but the locks appeared to have been charmed against simple opening spells. Like a fighter plane that had consumed half of its fuel getting out to the attack zone, Pettigrew knew that time was running out. He waited until after the ten PM auror shift change, and an hour later, grabbed a trash bin and smashed it against the glass.

Crash!!!

Glass fell onto the floor, and Pettigrew grabbed the wand. In a feeble attempt to cover the exact nature of the crime, he cast Incendio at the display case, setting the contents on fire. He picked up the trash container and tossed it against the other case, and set those contents on fire too.

Hearing voices coming from the next corridor over, he knew that he had mere seconds to make his escape. He tucked both wands into his pocket, assumed his other form and scurried down the hallway, cutting his front paw on the broken glass in the process.

... --- ...

Cornelius Fudge had been working late, as was his habit. He generally arrived late in the day and worked until ten or midnight, as he often had dinner functions to attend. About 11 PM, he heard a crash out in the hallway and half a minute later a second crash. Not one to take unnecessary chances, he fire-called the auror on duty before walking out of his office to take a look.

He didn't immediately see anything until he smelled smoke drifting down the hallway. He walked quickly down the hallway to see what was the matter when he noticed the burning cases and broken glass littering the floor. He pulled his wand out of the pocket and using an Aguamenti spell, put out the first fire. The young auror on duty arrived and did the same for the other case, and used a cleaning spell to sweep up all of the broken glass.

The young auror asked, "Should I summon one of the investigators, Minister?"

Fudge, believing that the whole thing was probably caused by drunken vandals, shook his head and replied, "No. No need for that. I'll take care of the paperwork. Just call Maintenance to replace the glass." The last thing in the world that he wanted, just days before hosting the Quidditch Cup, was an overblown report stating that He Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's personal effects had been stolen.

Pettigrew waited by the visitor exit until nine the next morning, when the first visitor of the day was getting ready to leave. He scurried into the telephone booth before the visitor had closed the door. Seconds later, he was outside at the street level of London.

Starving and almost mad from thirst, he quickly made his way to a street vendor and ordered some take-away and a bottle of water. Gobbling the food down, practically without swallowing, he quickly finished his meal.

He had been gone just over three days.

... --- ...



Harry halted his swim and relaxed for a moment at one end of the pool, pausing to survey the scene before him. Beside him Hermione continued for another lap, her tan legs flashing in the sunlight, offering brief glimpses of her nicely shaped, bikini covered bum. At the far end of the pool Susan and Hannah lounged in their floaties, offering two more treats for the eyes in their own brightly colored string bikinis. As might be expected, the messy-haired Gryffindor devoted most of his attention to the curvaceous strawberry blonde who smiled at him and waved when she noticed him looking her way.

Harry grinned and shook his head as he considered how dramatically his life had changed this summer. Undoubtedly the most pleasant of the changes were these opportunities to relax and enjoy the company of three attractive, minimally attired girls. His initial encounter with Susan, both revealing and embarrassing, had led to her offer of swimming lessons, which in turn developed into what had now become frequent sessions in this idyllic setting, often attended by one or both of their two best friends. It had certainly not escaped his notice when Susan's one-piece suit had been replaced by a series of more revealing two-piece styles, or that the other two girls also seemed to favor the brief swimwear.

One interesting aspect of the situation was the different attitudes expressed by the three girls toward their attire. Hannah, naturally outgoing, was the most flirtatious, perfectly at ease showing off her slender figure. Susan was the most self-conscious about her ever-changing body, even though in Harry's view it was the most spectacular of the three. But she constantly worried that her legs were too heavy, her bum was too big, her hips too wide, or her stomach too fat, even with the exercises that Mr. Scrimgeour had given them to do. Whereas she thought that the added muscle that Harry had put on looked great on him, she failed to see the significant improvements to her own body. Harry tried to reassure her that she looked 'just fine', but he was still too shy to address any of her specific concerns, unfounded though he felt them to be.

Hermione, by contrast, was quite matter of fact about the whole thing, with an apparent attitude of 'yes, this is a bikini, and I'm wearing it, so what?' For Harry, though, there was nothing 'so what?' about it. It wasn't that he found Hermione's newly revealed figure to be so

amazing. It was actually rather normal for a nearly fifteen year old girl. The amazing thing was that Hermione Granger, one of his best buddies since he was eleven, actually had a figure, and was apparently not shy about showing it.

As Hermione climbed out of the pool and caught him checking her out, she realized she had an opportunity to address the 'boy-girl' issue with Harry directly, and hopefully clarify her position in this new three-way relationship. So she walked back down to his end of the pool, and, instead of giving him the chewing out he expected, she smiled and jumped into the pool next to him.

"Enjoying the view?" she teased as Harry wiped away the water she had splashed into his face.

"I ... er ..." he began before giving up and slumping against the wall. "I'm dead, right?" he moaned.

Hermione laughed. "No, not really, I just thought I'd give you a hard time. I know you can't help looking; you are a teenage boy after all. You just need to make sure you don't stare at any one place too much, because that makes a girl uncomfortable. But otherwise, it's okay. Why do you think Susan and Hannah are wearing such small suits in the first place?"

"Oh," Harry replied slowly, surprised that he was apparently being let off the hook. "They do?" he added, in response to the last part of her comment. "And what about you?" he wondered, giving a slight nod to her own rather brief swimming costume.

Hermione blushed, which she tried to cover up with an aggressive response. "Well, why not?" she challenged. "I'm a girl too, you know."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that," he assured her. "I figured that out even before I got my eyes fixed," he joked. She smiled, and he continued. "And, for what it's worth, you look great. I mean that suit is, ah, quite fetching on you." Hermione's eyes widened at the unexpected compliment.

Harry, misinterpreting her look, stammered, "Not that ... erm ... I ... you know ... think about you that way."

Hermione beamed at him. "Don't worry, I understand. And I appreciate the compliment. If we weren't wearing swimsuits I'd hug you for saying something so sweet," she added, gesturing to his bare chest.

Harry grinned at her. "Good point," he agreed.

Hermione gave his arm a squeeze. "And just so you know," she added with a sly grin, "girls like to look at cute guys too."

Now it was Harry's turn to blush. "You think I'm cute?" he asked in surprise.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly Harry," she sighed. "Nearly every girl I know thinks you're cute."

Harry shook his head in puzzlement. "Then why ...?"

"Why haven't any of them ever done anything about it?" Hermione finished for him. Harry nodded. "I suppose it's because they're intimidated by you – you know, the Boy Who Lived and all that nonsense. Not to mention the rather impressive things you've done in your three years at Hogwarts," she pointed out. Hermione either wasn't aware of or chose to ignore her own role in intimidating Harry's would be suitors.

"That's one of the things that makes Susan so special," she continued. "That she's able to look past all that and see the wonderful boy inside that I know so well."

Harry ducked his head, his normal response to such praise, but couldn't hide the smile that the mention of his favorite Hufflepuff brought to his face. Hermione took a deep breath and pushed ahead with what she'd decided to tell him.

"Harry, I want you to know how glad I am about what's been happening in your life this summer," she declared. "All of it."

Particularly what's going on between you and Susan. Like you said earlier, I don't think of you that way, but you are my best friend and you deserve to be happy."

Harry smiled and nodded in appreciation for her concern. "And what about you?" he responded. "Do you think you and Ron..." Hermione was shaking her head before he could even finish.

"You have to be kidding!" she groaned. "Like I told Hannah, the only thing Ron and I have in common is you.

Harry could see her point and nodded.

Hermione turned serious once again. "But I like spending time with you. You're my very best friend in the world. And ... you see, the thing is, I've always worried that some day you'd get a girlfriend and, well, you wouldn't want me around anymore." Her voice broke slightly at the end and she ducked her head, not wanting him to see how emotional this subject made her. "But Susan's been so nice and included me and ..."

Harry gently reached out and raised her chin so he could look in her eyes, noticing the moisture gathering there. "Hermione," he said softly, "I'll always need you to be my friend. No matter what happens with any other girls. Heck, I need you more than ever to set me straight when I mess up with Susan." He chuckled as they both recalled the beginning of summer, when she'd done exactly that.

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered. "Thank you so much." She looked at the frown on his face and asked, "What's wrong?"

Harry replied, "If Susan decides to ... be my friend... girlfriend someday, and it doesn't work out..."

Hermione could see his barely stated point. It would be awkward, to say the least, with the two of them living under one roof during the summer. She suggested, "When you get back to school, why don't you take her out to Hogsmeade and go for a few walks together and hold hands. If it doesn't work out, you both can still be friends. If she wants to do more, she'll either tell you or send you signals."

"Signals?" questioned Harry, completely out of his comfort zone

"We'll talk more about it after school starts." She gave him a quick hug, and noticed that Susan was watching them.

... --- ...

Later in the afternoon Hannah agreed to distract Harry so that Susan and Hermione could clear the air.

"Susan, I'm sorry," Hermione blurted out as soon as they were out of sight of the other two. "But Harry's been my best friend for so long and I think it's great that he and you are getting together and you and your aunt have been just wonderful to him, and I've never seen him happier ..." She paused briefly to catch her breath, and hesitated.

Susan immediately understood what was troubling the older girl. "But you're worried that you'll be left behind; that he won't have time for you any more." Hermione nodded with a sigh.

"That's basically what I told him in the pool," she confirmed. "But he assured me that I'd always be his friend, and he hoped that he could still be my friend and I was so relieved that I just had to hug him."

Susan chuckled. "I've felt the same way about him myself at times. He can be so sweet." She cocked her head and regarded Hermione thoughtfully. "You really care about him, don't you?" Hermione nodded slowly, brushing a tear from her eye. "And Hermione, it's so obvious that he cares just as much for you," she continued, taking hold of her hand. "I'd never want to come between a friendship like what you two have."

Hermione wiped another tear from her eye and replied, "Thanks, Susan. It's so reassuring to hear that. I don't know what I'd do if ... well, I guess I won't have to worry about that."

Something clicked in Susan's mind. "You two have a lot in common. I mean, more than just being Gryffindors. You're muggleborn and Harry, well, he might as well be."

Hermione nodded. "We see the magical world much the same way. And on top of that, neither of us had any friends before Hogwarts, so we're very possessive of the few friends we do have. So it's been pretty much the two of us and Ron for the past three years."

Understanding her point, Susan observed, "Harry's been really good about insisting that I spend time alone with Hannah this summer. Now I see why that's so important to him. I'll try to do the same with you two, and Ron. Once we get back to Hogwarts I'm sure you'll spend more time with him than I will, with the way the Houses are. So I think it will all work out just fine."

Susan wrapped her arm around the bushy haired Gryffindor and pulled her to her side. "I'm really glad we got a chance to clear this up, before anyone's feelings got hurt. And I'm glad I've had the chance to get to know you this summer."

Hermione's smile lit up her face. "Me too!"

With a conspiratorial tone to her voice, Susan whispered, "So let's talk about his birthday party tomorrow..."

... --- ...

While Pettigrew was lurking around the Ministry waiting to recover his master's wand, Amelia was discussing the Quidditch World Cup with Harry and Susie. "You both have tickets, unfortunately not together. Harry will be going with Arthur's family and Susie will be going with Ben's. From what they both had mentioned, their campsites are practically next to each other, so I'm certain that you'll all have fun together. I had previously volunteered to work at the Ministry that night, so I won't be able to attend.

They all thought that it would be a lot of fun.

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The desert heat was enough to take the old scribe's breath away. As the miles slipped by, he wondered how any road could come to be named 'The Loneliest Road'. Even in the heat of the mid-day sun, he shuddered to think about how McGonagall would react when he handed in the next few reports. She was always so squeamish.

He could almost see the disapproving look on her face as he watched the shimmering heat waves on the long roadway.

He wished his fellow storyteller Mike could be riding along with him, but quaffed down several extra cold butterbeers along the way; hoping that they would be able to ride together soon. He also thought kindly of the Chem Prof who had reminded the old scribe exactly what had happened by the pool.

## Chapter Six

### Susan's Promise

... --- ...

Sunday 31 July

When all of Harry's birthday party guests had been given dessert, Hannah finally cornered her best friend and asked, "Well...?"

"Well... What?"

Hannah persisted, "One day he's the twinkle in your eye, the next day you have him over. A week later he's moved in and he becomes your sorta brother. By the end of the month it's obvious that he's not your brother." Hannah smirked at the blush that comment brought to her friend's face before she continued. "Granger claims he's had a horrible upbringing, but she won't give any details. You've been giving him 'swimming lessons' for weeks and I haven't been to Welshpool for a sleepover all summer. Well...?"

"Well, I think the greater question is, what's Neville talking to Harry about and why is he looking over at you when he's talking?"

Hannah shook off her friend's sneaky evasive tactic and demanded, "Don't change the subject, Sue. Has he kissed you yet?"

Susan shook her head, and replied, "No. He's not ready for that yet. Things really were crappy at his aunt and uncle's home. He's got some things to work out first before I snog him senseless. He's been through some pretty awful stuff..." She trailed off as if considering what else to say.

Hannah looked ready to burst in anticipation, but Susan gave her a serious look and pleaded, "Just let it go for now. Okay? Don't worry about Hermione. She's just looking out for his best interest and wants to stay friends with him." The pensive memories that he'd shown her were his, and he never said a word suggesting that she should tell anyone else. As it was, she was pretty sure that he'd been showing



them to Auntie, and she had been allowed to sit in on the viewing, not the other way around. People had died in those memories and visions. This wasn't kid stuff.

Disappointed, Hannah nodded and Susan realized that whether her friend was ready or not, their childhood was rapidly slipping away from them. She hoped that the rest of the summer holiday would be loads of fun and largely uneventful.

Suddenly there was a large BOOM!!!

Fred and George looked at each other and George remarked, "I really didn't know that Ron could move that fast."

Fred replied, "True enough, not even as a canary; but those two aurors don't look very amused. Come to look at it, either does Mum. Perhaps we'd best go see what Neville and Harry are doing."

... --- ...

The tour buses that Pettigrew rode from France to Italy were crowded. Having spent all of his Hogwarts money, he managed to steal a purse at the stop in Lyon and disappeared into the crowd before the theft was discovered. While Hannah was grilling Susan about miniscule details of her budding romance with Harry, Peter was attempting to cross the border into Italy, which seemed to be on a higher alert than usual.

He vacillated between attempting to apparate without being discovered or risking capture if his notice-me-not charm should fail. Concluding that he would eventually have to return with his master in tow, he didn't want to risk another increase in auror security by announcing an illegal border crossing via apparation. He reboarded the bus when it was ready to start up again, sat towards the back and quietly cast the charm.

The customs official entered the bus and one by one examined everyone's passports. Miraculously, he passed by Pettigrew's seat, finished his inspection and let the bus go on its way.

... --- ...

Monday 1 August

As Harry was finishing a thank-you note to the Abbotts, Professors Sprout and McGonagall were discussing their favorite students. McGonagall mentioned, "I received a note from Amelia Bones authorizing Harry to drop Divination and take up Runes. It's about time. Sybil predicted his death no less than forty times last term. I don't see how he could stand it."

Sprout rolled her eyes at their colleague's strange behavior. She replied, "Susan Bones dropped Hagrid's class to take Runes too. She referred to it as "the monster hour" and stated that either the syllabus should be revised to reflect what he's really doing, or that Hagrid should teach the class as advertised."

Not wishing to get started on a pointless conversation regarding Hagrid's unconventional teaching methods, Minerva commented, "I hope she turns out to be as good of a friend for him as Miss Granger. Heaven knows, that boy could use all of the friends that he can get."

... --- ...

The tiny body that Voldemort inhabited was weak from lack of nourishment and dehydration. He kept Nagini nearby in the event of the body's death. Given that the fool of a wizard had been gone an eternity now, the loss of the body seemed to be a growing likelihood. Riddle imagined that Pettigrew had somehow either bungled the job and was afraid to return, or more likely, had been captured, either at the Ministry, or while crossing a border.

As Riddle was seriously considering returning to Nagini, he heard a man approaching. He carefully readied his wand and waited.

... --- ...

Scrimgeour was more impressed with the boy each time he managed to slip out of his grasp. This was their fifth self-defense lesson in the

last three weeks and while the boy wasn't strong by any stretch of the word, he was quick – very quick.

The girl wasn't especially strong or fast, but she was in decent shape for a witch from all of the swimming that she must have done. He gave them instructions to try running a mile every other day to build up their endurance, and told them that he'd stop by again in a few days.

Tuesday 2 August

As the Hogwarts headmaster and the heads of house were having breakfast together, an owl flew down to Professor Dumbledore. He examined the note for a moment, determined it was from Gringotts and opened it. A frown crossed his face for a moment and finally was replaced by a smile. Dumbledore put the rolled up note in his pocket and Snape who was sitting next to him asked, "What is it, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore replied, "It appears that we shall be visited by several Gringotts goblins and Mr. Potter tomorrow morning. He has claimed ownership of the basilisk that he slew in his second year."

Snape countered, "Yes, privileged Potter and his little worm. Since it took place on school property, clearly it belongs to the school. In fact, some of the ingredients would be useful. He should have offered it up a year and a half ago, when it would have been fresh. You could have given him a few house points if he needed his ego further inflated, and he would have been happy."

Dumbledore waved off Severus' animosity toward the boy and replied, "He could have slain the basilisk at Buckingham Palace and it would have rightfully been his. He cited the dragonslayer law of 978, which is the supreme word on the subject. In fact, Gringotts has offered him 200,000 galleons for the remains. Basilisks take decades to decay, even in the open air. My speculation is that it will have changed little since the day that he last laid eyes on it."

Dumbledore reconsidered Snape's words for a moment and added, "Severus, Harry has had quite a difficult summer and has undergone

many changes. He will not be the timid student that you have taken so much pleasure in taunting over the last three years. I would ask that you bury your hatred for James before school starts and see Harry for the young man that he is.”

Snape was about to protest when Dumbledore added, “Harry has learned of the prophecy and has acquired a much wider support network than you might imagine. It will not take Amelia Bones or the investigators long to conclude that Voldemort heard at least a part of the prophecy, and quickly narrow down the source of the information.”

Snape retorted, “But you told no one. I was spoken for at the hearings.”

Dumbledore replied, “I didn’t need to give out those details. However, she could easily turn those events into charges of accessory to dozens of murders, including her own family members. Should she seek a pound of flesh on their behalf, it would be yours. I ask you again, Severus, bury your hatred of James and do not provoke the boy.”

Snape stood up to leave and replied, “As you wish, Headmaster.”

... --- ...

Wednesday 3 August

Amelia faced an interesting dilemma. Harry was trying as hard as he could to give the money away that Gringotts had paid him for what had turned out to be an absolutely enormous basilisk. Two hundred thousand galleons was a formidable sum – equal to the non-property assets of the Bones estate.

She had been pleased and honestly, a bit surprised at his reaction upon learning the true magnitude of both his trust account as well as his parents’ estate. It was as if he was somehow embarrassed by the entire idea. He hadn’t gone off and made any mad money purchases. Somehow she felt that he didn’t even see the money as being his.

She tried an interesting tactic, and said, "Harry, you obviously don't appreciate the fame and celebrity status that came your way from the night that your parents were murdered. No self-respecting young man would. I admire that in you. However, the money that you received today was for something that you alone did. The goblins paid you a fair amount, and they will certainly do all right when they take that monster apart and sell the pieces over time on the open market."

She watched him nod at her words, but he didn't say anything.

"My point is, you earned that gold, Harry. Someday you or your children will find a good use for that gold, and you'll be glad that you kept it. Please promise me that you will come talk with me first before you ever act on an urge to give any of your money away."

She saw the young man nod and came to realize that having never had any of his own, gold held no sway over him.

... --- ...

Wednesday 3 August

Voldemort caressed the length of his own wand. Still too long for him, the combination of phoenix feather and yew wood had been the perfect conduit for his magic. He sent Wormtail back to the village, ostensibly to have him bring back a bottle of brandy and milk, but really to allow himself the opportunity to try a few spells side by side with the temporary wand and his own. There was no comparison! He estimated that spells using his own wand were two – three times more powerful, putting him at ten – twenty percent of his former power.

"Here is your food, Master."

"Thank you, Wormtail. Bring the girl here and have part of the bottle of brandy, as a small reward for the work that you've done."

Riddle quickly fed himself and felt better than he had since that poor excuse for a wizard had arrived late and practically starved him. He had become dehydrated and hadn't eaten in almost a day, and his

temporary body could barely hold out. Two and a half days later, he felt much better.

Pettigrew came back minutes later with the girl. He had apparently taken the time to wash her, really another just excuse to grope the girl, but at least she no longer stank.

Voldemort was ready and cast Legilimens. He found the block and probed. Slowly, too slowly, the block gave way. Voldemort found himself beginning to tire and pressed harder. Too hard for Jorkin's health, but he found himself watching one of the missing memories.

Jorkins was delivering a set of papers to Barty Crouch's home.

Winky the house elf opened the door and announced, "Master isn't here right now, Miss."

Jorkins let herself in, moving past the uncooperative elf. As she was going into the kitchen to put the bundle of papers on the table, she heard a chair fall over, and before the elf could stop her, had reached the eating area, only to see her boss's supposedly long-dead son picking himself up from the floor.

"Barty, are you okay?" She asked, amazed that he was there.

"The Dark Lord is my master," muttered the young man, now in his early thirties.

Just then, Barty Senior came in, sized up the situation and the memory ended.

In his excitement, Voldemort pressed hard, too hard, to see what had happened next, and the woman's mind gave a sort of snap, as if torn. With a final effort, Riddle quickly extracted himself from her mind and knew that there would be no more meaningful information to be gathered.

"This changes everything," muttered Riddle. A servant, a loyal, capable servant, waiting to be repatriated, not from the fortress of Azkaban, which was completely out of his reach for now, but under

some sort of house arrest – no, it couldn't have been official. Crouch Senior must have a servant at home or possibly the house elf acting as a silent guard. Incapacitating both of them would be a challenge given their current limitations.

"Wormtail, come here."

"Yes, Master."

"The girl is tired. Take her back to the tree, bind her and come back here when you have finished."

Voldemort considered the situation. Crouch Senior had obviously cast the memory charm on Jorkins – his own employee. From Wormtail's account, she had worked there many years, most of them for Crouch.

"Wormtail, which of my followers were captured or killed after I disappeared?"

Pettigrew began listing everyone that he knew, from years of listening to Arthur Weasley at his kitchen table. "Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and McNair were arrested, Master, but were let go after Malfoy claimed that they had been under the Imperius curse the entire time. Borgan claimed that he'd never seen you. Mulciber, Rookwood and the LeStranges are in Azkaban...Evan Rosier, Patrick and Wilkes were killed by aurors..." He began to bore Voldemort as he recited nearly every dinner conversation that Arthur Weasley had ever reported on.

"...Barty Junior was arrested with the LeStranges. They were torturing the Longbottoms attempting to get information on where you might have gone. Barty died in prison a few weeks after he got there."

Voldemort said nothing, all but stunned by the magnitude of what he'd just heard. He practically tuned the incompetent excuse of a wizard out as he prattled on. Barty's own father must have faked his son's death to help him escape from the mighty fortress.

"... then Snape got off somehow and Karkarov got out of prison by naming other Death Eaters, Master."

“That will do, Wormtail. Go amuse yourself with the girl. I have work to do. We will be leaving here in a few days.”

A loyal, capable servant who hadn't renounced him. One whom everyone thought dead. Delighted by the opportunities that he saw, the Dark Lord began making his plans.

... --- ...

Thursday 4 August

Peter Pettigrew was disgusted with himself. His master had told him to kill Bertha when he had finished with her. Peter had come to enjoy Bertha's company, not just touching her all over, but for hours at a time he took comfort in the physical presence of lying next to her at night, in the forest.

She reminded him of a time when he was much younger and Sally Jenkins had been accommodating. They weren't in love, but it had been nice. Her family moved away soon after and Peter fell down the slippery slope into the Dark Lord's path soon afterwards. He knew that there would be no redemption for him in his life, but he regretted killing Bertha just the same. He never enjoyed killing, especially women.

“Come, Wormtail. We have learned what we can and have much work to do. You will be greatly rewarded for your efforts. Nagini has fed. We will begin our journey back to Britain.” He felt much better with his own wand back in hand. Shrinking the body of the woman down to a rabbit size meal allowed them to easily dispose of the body without overly tiring either him or Nagini. He cast a cleansing charm on Pettigrew as they would be traveling by muggle methods. He did not trust Wormtail's apparation ability, and for now, at least, they were in no hurry.

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Meanwhile, Harry examined the note for the third time.



Harry, I'm sorry that I wasn't able to bring you a proper present. Costa Rica is a nice place to live and barracuda fishing is fun. I did find this handy pocket knife for you. Always keep it with you, you'll never know when it might come in handy.

I want you to read this carefully, Harry. Give me your solemn oath, if you would. You need to do well in school.

Uncle Sylvester

Harry puzzled over the note that he knew was from Sirius. Suddenly inspiration hit him. He tapped the letter with his wand and said, "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."

The back of the letter, which had been written on an expensive linen paper, suddenly had loads of writing on it!

Harry,

I'm working at a pet shop in Spain, thus the parrots. Thanks for your last note. I knew Edgar and Rachel Bones, mostly through your mother, who was friends with Rachel in School. Edgar went through the academy with your dad. They were good people, and I have to say that Rachel was quite a looker.

If Amelia took their daughter in and gave her a good home all these years and offered the same to you, Harry, you should take it. Take it, Harry. I'll love you until I draw my last breath, Harry, but I'm not in a position to give you a safe, stable home right now.

Harry, I'm not able to access more than my old school vault right now, though I have to say, it grew a bit since your dad and I graduated. I don't know if you were able to get at the funds that your parents left you or not, but if you need anything, anything at all, I can help you.

Love,

Snuffles

Harry smiled, recalling that Hermione's advice was, as usual right. The news that Sirius was talking about was almost a month old. Apparently parrots didn't make especially fast mail carriers.

He wrote a note back recommending that his godfather purchase a cell phone and wrote down his own phone number. As carefully as he could, he tied the note onto the parrot's leg and sent it back on its way.

As he was watching the parrot fly away, Susan walked into his room and asked, "Did you send him something back?"

Harry nodded and showed her the note. She smiled when she read Sirius's comment about her mum and commented, "I hope things work out for him, Harry. It sounds like he wants to be a part of your life."

Harry nodded, praying that Pettigrew would somehow get caught.

... --- ...

Wednesday 17 August

A few weeks later, Harry had another of his horrible visions as he was sleeping. He saw an old man, a snake named Nagini, Pettigrew and Voldemort in his baby form. Voldemort spoke with and taunted the old man before murdering him with a killing curse. Harry awoke in a cold sweat and a pounding headache as the jet of green light cut the old man down.

Seconds later, he fell out of his bed with a thump and began retching onto the hardwood floor.

Amelia awoke at the sound of Harry falling out of bed and immediately guessed what had happened. She rushed into his room and asked him if he was okay.

In a small voice, Harry spoke of what he saw. Amelia could feel his pain and noticed that his scar had turned a bright red, as if it were brand new, rather than the thin white zig-zag line that it had become

after nearly thirteen years. One sentence particularly caught her notice.

“He used a different wand... when he killed that man... I reckon he used the same curse that he used when he murdered my... Mum.” Tears streamed down his face.

Amelia pressed, “What did you mean, Harry? Wait, I’ll be right back.”

Ten minutes later, she returned with her solicitor pensieve, to find Susan sitting beside him on the bed, holding his hand and wiping his forehead with a damp cloth. The thoughtful girl must have come in right after she left, and had already cleaned up the mess Harry had made. Harry withdrew a dark grey strand from his mind and placed it into the shimmering dish.

Before he did anything else, Amelia suggested, “Susie, you and Harry might as well go get dressed. I’m certain that we’ve all had as much sleep for the evening as we’re going to get. Rufus and Connie will be over shortly.”

In an effort to cheer up her friend, Susan squeezed his hand to get him to look at her, gave him a wink and suggested, “You shower first, Harry.”

In a flat voice, Harry replied, “Okay.”

Susan went to her room with tears welling in her eyes. She had an idea how much pain that Harry must be in, witnessing a man getting murdered by the same monster, using the same curse that he’d used on her parents and his... and on him! Prophecy or not, she vowed to herself that she’d do everything that she could to help him, to comfort him, to love him someday, and somehow, someday, help him finish that monster off, once and for all.

An hour later, Scrimgeour, Hammer and Amelia were talking around the kitchen table as Susan sat on the couch by Harry. She asked, “Why all the interest in his wand?”

Connie replied, "That's the whole point. A few weeks ago, there was a bit of night-time vandalism that took place at the ministry. At least, that's what we were led to believe. Minister Fudge claimed that the display cases containing Sirius Black's and He-Who-Must Not-Be-Named's wands were broken into and burned up. Based on what Harry saw, it appears that the fire was designed to cover up the real crime, which was the theft of You-Know-Who's wand. It appears that whoever stole it, most likely Pettigrew based upon the evidence, set the fire to mask the theft and now he's got his proper wand back."

"Riddle."

Amelia smiled, waiting for Harry to continue.

Connie looked confused and asked, "I'm sorry?"

Harry stated, "His real name is Tom Riddle. If you aren't comfortable calling him Voldemort, at least call him Riddle."

Seeing the tension break, Amelia announced, "Let's eat."

... --- ...

Amelia and Harry sat at the dinner table waiting for Susan to get back from Hannah's. Harry went along from time to time, but respected that she and Susan had been friends forever and still enjoyed their time together sun tanning by the beach or just being teenage girls.

He had visited Hermione several times over the last month and they had lunch in muggle London a few times with Neville, Susan and Hannah. He had invited Ron along twice, but Ron had told him that his mum had had other plans for him both those days. Harry had hoped that money or prejudice hadn't been the issue, but didn't want to bring it up to his friend.

Amelia asked, "How was Just Rufus' self defense lesson the other day?"

Harry replied, "Pretty good. He talked about ways to escape if someone tried to grab me and showed me ways to block punches and kicks without getting hurt too badly."

Amelia nodded and remarked, "That's good. Let's try something else. Supposed a handful of Death Eaters were out and you and Susie were getting attacked. What would you do?"

Harry thought for a moment and replied, "I'd probably try and disarm or stun a few and do what I could to get us both out of there."

Amelia considered his response and said. "I liked the second part of your answer. It should have been the first thing on your mind." She paused for a moment, choosing her words and added, "You may not like it Harry, but you're special. The aurors always have to attempt to stun and incarcerate a bad guy before they can use additional force. To be honest, too many good people have been hurt or killed trying to follow that law. In effect, it gives the bad guys a free shot at us. If you stun one of five bad guys, invariably one of their buddies will just revive him or her and they're just as good as new. You're back facing five to one and accomplished nothing."

Harry nodded and she continued, "Its different if you're in a one-on-one fight. If you stun your attacker, you've finished the fight. There's no one else to revive the attacker or untie him. In a group setting like I mentioned, get away if you can. If you can't, hurt them, disarm them and snap their wands if you can. First and foremost, stay alive." She gave his arm a squeeze and mentioned, "You're very good at that."

Harry smiled back and she finished her thought. "As I said, like it or not, you're special. If you injure an attacker, or if you are forced to take a life in the course of defending yourself, its extremely unlikely that the Wizengamot would take action against you."

Harry wasn't sure what to say, and she added, "Before he retired, Moody always told his squad, 'Do what you have to do to finish your shift and go home. Protect yourself first and protect your partner if you can. We can always go after the bad guys another day.' Does that make sense, Harry?"

The teen smiled and replied, "I reckon it does. It was a pretty good speech, except he probably swiveled his goofy eye around as he was giving it. Thanks."

... --- ...

Wednesday 25 August

With a crack, the Knight bus departed, and Hermione walked up to the door of the Bones estate in Welshpool. She was happy that her friend Harry finally had a nice place to live and was in the care of a loving guardian.

She knocked on the door and Smidgen, the little house elf greeted her, "Good morning, Miss Granger. Susan and her Harry friend are out in back. Come in. Would you like some tea, Miss?"

Hermione smiled at the term that she had used to describe Harry, and replied, "No, but thank you. I'll go find them." She walked out in the back garden and was surprised to see Harry and Susan wrestling on the ground. She called out, "Harry Potter, what in the world do you think you're doing?"

As he momentarily loosened his hold on Susan, she scrambled on top of him, and he wheezed, "We're practicing."

Horried at the thought of what the two teens might have been practicing, she demanded, "And just what were you two practicing?"

Understanding her implied meaning faster than Harry, Susan panted, "One of the aurors gave us some self defense lessons, and we're practicing escapes. Harry doesn't seem sufficiently motivated, so I might have to start tickling him if he doesn't get up."

Blushing slightly at her own misguided thoughts, Hermione changed the subject suggesting, "That does sound like something Harry needs to learn, but we have to get to the Burrow by noon. Mrs. Weasley is expecting us for lunch." Realizing that her friend probably would have rather gone with the Abbots, she added, "We'll look you and Hannah up when we get there."

Harry got up and said, "I'll just be a few minutes, and I'll be right down."

When Harry had left and Susan had caught her breath, Hermione quietly asked, "What type of self defense are you being taught?"

Susan replied, "When Auntie found him, Harry's uncle was kicking the crap out of him, and Harry was barely able to protect himself. One of the aurors volunteered to teach him how to properly block punches and kicks and how to escape if someone grabs him. We've been getting lessons for a few weeks and he gave us an exercise program to work on. It's nothing fancy - jogging for endurance and he wants Harry to do a bunch of pushups and sit-ups to build up his strength a bit."

Hermione gave a thoughtful look and commented, "That was very nice of your aunt to arrange."

Susan replied, "Really, she had nothing to do with it. Rufus met Harry a few weeks ago and they sort of took a liking to each other. He was the one who suggested it and has been volunteering his time."

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As Crow got off of his Harley and pulled out his parchment to give to McGonagall, he quickly reviewed it – No product placements and no explicit scenes. He smiled as he thought of her reaction to the next report and vowed to practice his fast getaway before he handed it off to the old professor.

McGonagall looked at the parchment and nodded. Perhaps she had finally gotten through to the seemingly incorrigible scribe. With Chem Prof's guidance, even his penmanship had improved.

She noticed a slip of paper, yes muggle paper, that read 4257626. Obviously it was some sort of code or part of an arithmancy equation.

As he was leaving, she wondered about the wicked smile on the old scribe's face. Something about it reminded her of Fred and George just before they were going to pull a serious prank on a staff member.

She shuddered at the thought.



## Chapter Seven

### Bagman

Thursday 25 August

Ludo Bagman was having a field day in the hours prior to the match. It seemed that nearly everyone wanted to show their support for Ireland by making a wager of some type – Ireland would score first and Ireland would get the most goals were the two bets that he tried to avoid taking, as he believed that it was quite likely that they might. He did so as inconspicuously as possible to avoid revealing his inside knowledge of the two teams.

Bagman had accepted nearly twenty-five thousand galleons of action when the strangest bet of the evening was called for from one of Arthur Weasley's boys – Krum would catch the snitch, but Ireland would win anyway. Bagman knew that Krum was such a strong seeker that the game would be over before Ireland could score five goals, let alone be up by over a hundred and fifty points. Further, he'd heard that Arthur was barely making ends meet with such a large family. However, a little guilt did not keep him from accepting the boys' bet of fifty galleons while offering only 3 – 1 odds that both conditions would actually be met.

The only thing that separated Bagman from a typical sportsbook betting parlor was that Bagman was making direct bets that a certain outcome would occur – in this case, Bulgaria win the match. Most sportsbooks could care less who actually won. They made their money by accepting bets from both sides and taking a small percentage – usually three to five percent, known as the vigorish or vig – as a commission. In that way, the winners were merely paid by the losers and the house was never really out any money - They just took the commissions. Bagman needed to make much more than a thousand galleons on the twenty-five that he'd accepted. Because he knew, actually knew that Krum would end the match early, he made direct bets only with those misguided players who believed that Ireland would win. Yes, it was a bigger risk, but he fully expected to clear twenty-five thousand for the evening.

He didn't specifically target his fellow ministry employees, as he knew that more than a few were barely in a position to place a wager, and he didn't really want to see a bunch of embarrassed or sad faces the next week in the ministry lifts after he had taken their money.

As it became time for the game to start, Bagman knew that it would be one of the shortest Quidditch World Cups that he'd ever seen. He estimated that Krum would need no more than ten to fifteen minutes to catch the snitch and put the game away. With luck, by nine PM he'd be back home, free and clear from the goblin moneylenders, with nearly two thousand galleons extra weighing down his pockets.

... --- ...

Susan wasn't the quidditch fan that some of her housemates were. Rather than having a real interest in the game, the strategies, or moves between the chasers and the keepers, she enjoyed watching the seekers.

There are two basic strategies of being a seeker. First there were those rare individuals who could successfully shut out every aspect of the game. For those few who could, the quaffle, chasers and keepers were of no importance and ceased to exist within their consciousness. If the seeker was focused enough, the distraction made by the bludger could also be shut out.

This strategy left the seeker vulnerable to occasionally being hit by a bludger, but more often than not, these seekers won that game – especially if their team's beaters focused on protecting their seeker and keeping the bludgers at bay.

Victor Krum was such a seeker. Just a seventh year at Durmstrang with two years playing pro, he had only lost a total of three matches, and two of those had been in his first year.

The other common seeker strategy was to act as a utility player of sorts – keeping one eye open for the snitch, but focusing more on acting as the fourth chaser of sorts or acting as a human bludger to break up the opposing team's plays as often as possible. When one of this player's teammates saw the snitch, they would shout

something in a prearranged code and the player would revert to being a seeker.

While on average, these seekers only caught a third of the snitches, their teams averaged seven incremental goals per game. If the two teams would have had evenly matched chasers, it wouldn't be a winnable strategy. However if paired with an already superior set of chasers, the effect of the other team effectively playing shorthanded for an hour or so could be devastating.

Ireland had such a combination this year. Combined with a lucky pick of the schedule and the chance flights of several snitches, their real strategy had been masked. As such, their plan for the night was simple – Stop Krum and win the game by having their seeker, Lynch help break up plays and get plenty of goals from chasers, Troy, Mullet and the exceptionally talented young witch, Lisa Moran.

... --- ...

In the top box of the stadium, Minister Fudge and the Bulgarian minister were seated on the left end, directly in front of the seat that was apparently saved for Barty Crouch (Senior) and Winky, his house elf. Next to the Bulgarian Minister sat Lucius Malfoy, his lovely wife, Narcissa, and their son, Draco. Next to Draco was Ludo Bagman, who had been tapped to announce the play-by-play to the large crowd that had gathered for the event. In the row ahead of the ministers and the Malfoys sat the Weasleys, accompanied by their friends Hermione Granger and Harry Potter.

The seating arrangement wouldn't have been of significance, except that on the way out, Fudge passed within inches of Junior, who happened to have been poked by Fudge's wand. Even under the Imperius, Junior grabbed the offending object by reflex.

The sensation of the magic from the wand coursing up Junior's arm, along with the sights and sounds from the cheering crowd, was enough to break the Imperius curse which Crouch's father had placed upon him. Before anyone had noticed, Junior, who was hiding under an invisibility cloak, had pocketed Fudge's wand.

... --- ...

Fred and George Weasley had big plans. It was their goal to open a joke shop and sell their prepackaged pranks, gizmos and novelties which they had invented and had a passion for developing. They were the rare pair who could have as much fun from setting up a prank as actually seeing it, or personally pulling it off. Their vision was grand, but their means were quite limited. They knew that their parents lacked the wealth to provide them with startup money for their fledgling enterprise.

Unlike their brother Ron, who was a true slacker, Fred and George had an abundance of ambition. They would seek out and work the odd jobs that were occasionally available in the little village where their parents lived. Over the summer, they had earned nearly five hundred pounds and had spent almost half of it purchasing the supplies needed for their latest creation – fake wands. They had built quite a stock and a variety of the realistic looking wands, with the intent of selling them along with their other new creation, canary creams.

At the point of the afternoon before the match when they were greeted by Bagman, who was out looking for betting action, they had some fifty galleons and a few knuts in cash, plus about half of their stock of joke items remaining to be sold. They quickly made their bet with Bagman, in hopes of ending the summer being halfway to their goal of having a thousand galleons to start their business.

An hour later, as they sat waiting for the match to start, they fell back into their two-sided banter that came so naturally to them

“Got any wands left, brother mine?”

“Not a one, brother mine. Are we out of canary creams too?”

“Completely. Good thing Mum didn’t spot them when we were leaving the house.”

“Correct. In fact, we’re up forty galleons so far, even with the wager that we placed.”

“Smashing.”

“Spiffing.”

“Corking.”

“Brilliant.”

“Look at that, brother, Ronnikins seems to have become a bit enamored with the veela over there.

Hermione noticed him, too – drooling.”

“Check.”

“The far away gaze.”

“Check.”

“Waving his arms and calling to them.”

“Check”

“Tent up.”

“Oops.”

“Yes, I’d say he’s really made a favorable impression today – not.”  
They looked at each other and grinned.

“Look at that. Not even McGonagall ever got her lips that thin.  
Hermione must be really disgusted with him.”

“If he points that thing at anybody, she’s liable to pull it off.”

“Bob-it?”

“That would hurt, but the way he’s going, Lil Red will never get any use anyway.”

“Good thing we took our newly invented, little-head sleep-ez before the match.”

“No far away look.”

“No embarrassing stains.”

“Just four sickles each.”

“Angelina and Alicia will be quite impressed.”

“You think so?”

“Of course.”

“Match’s started.”

“We’re on our way. Ireland scored the first goal.”

“Krum is searching, but the snitch is nowhere to be seen.”

“Good for us.”

“Ireland scored again.”

“And again.”

“And again.”

“Ouch! That has to hurt. Krum took a bludger right to the face, just as he was going for the snitch. Well brother, so much for our concern that it would be a quick game. He looks dazed.”

Alas, the twins were right. Two hours later, Ireland was ahead by some two hundred points, largely due to their strategy of using Lynch, their seeker, as a fourth chaser. Whereas Bagman was noticeably subdued in his commentary, the twins’ incessant back and forth banter was gaining in intensity.

"Look, brother mine, Krum's seen the snitch."

"Ireland's seeker's completely out of position. Krum's got it. By George, I think we've called it spot on. Ireland won the match, but Krum got the snitch!"

"Aye, Fred. Let's be the first to congratulate Mr. Bagman."

"Before he weasels away."

"So to speak."

"No Leprechaun gold either. I saw him picking handfuls of the stuff up."

"None for us."

"New robes?"

"Definitely."

"Should we tell Ronnikins about the tournament?"

"Nope. We wormed that information out of Perce the Ponce, fair and square."

"Cauldron bottoms anyone?"

"None for me. We'll focus on Alicia's."

"And Angelina's."

"Prank Ron?"

"It would be a waste. He's digging his own holes."

"You're right. Look there goes Harry and Susan Bones."

"Definitely not acting like his little sister."

“Nothing little there. Gin-Gin won’t be pleased.”

“Nope, but she’ll get over it.”

... --- ...

Later that evening, Harry prompted, “Come on Ron, let’s go see Hannah and Susan.”

The teen, with a long look on his face replied, “I’ll stay here with Hermione and Dad, thanks.”

His older brother said, “Come on, Ronnikins. We won’t tell them that you bet all of your gold on a losing team, will we Fred?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Nope, the thought never entered my mind. Of course, now that you mentioned it, it is on my mind.”

Hermione added, “I’m going too, Ron. You can stay here with Ginny if you want.” The last thing in the world that she wanted was to hang around Ron while he sulked about having made a ridiculous bet that he couldn’t afford to lose.

The red headed teen walked back into his smelly tent and pouted. He had wagered his fifteen galleons on Krum and Bulgaria, and it didn’t turn out that way. He was in no mood to hear about the twins’ fantastic bet yet another time.

A dozen campsites down from the Weasley tents, Hannah greeted them, “Hi guys. That was a fun match. How was it in the top box?”

Harry replied, “Okay, but I was surprised that there was a vacant seat. I would have thought that they would have been spoken for a long time ago. Maybe someone got sick.”

Fred added, “Dad told us that Percy’s boss, Barty Crouch was supposed to be there. We talked with him when we first got here.”

George finished the thought, “I wonder where he went off to.”



Susan replied, "Who knows. Have a few butterbeers. Fred, George, have you met Hannah's parents?"

George spoke for the both of them, "No. We're pleased to meet you, sir and ma'am."

Ben replied, "We're happy to meet you two also." A moment later he mentioned, "Actually, I need to go find Ludo Bagman for a minute."

With a twinkle in his eye, Fred inquired, "I expect you made a little wager favoring Ireland?"

Ben nodded and seeing their smiles asked, "Yes. Did you too?"

Smirking, George replied, "We made a two-part bet with him that Krum would catch the snitch and Ireland would win the match."

Ben nodded appreciatively and replied, "I hope he gave you good odds on that. Even though you won, it was a long-shot."

Fred replied, "He only gave us 3 – 1, but we were among the first in line to collect. The ponce tried to pass off some Leprechaun gold on us, until the Bulgarian minister noticed him picking the stuff up and set him right."

George added, "You should find him before he pulls a runner."

Ben nodded and replied, "That's some good advice. What did you win?"

Fred replied, "We bet fifty galleons, so we won a hundred-fifty."

Ben was surprised at the size of the wager and replied, "That's great, lads. Have fun with it. I'll go look him up and be back later. There're plenty of butterbeers in the tent."

Susan asked, "Where's Ron?"

Hermione replied, "He's back at his tent, sulking. He made a big deal of making a fifteen galleon bet with Mr. Bagman, and he lost. Mrs.

Weasley gave him that money to buy dress robes, and he'll be in so much trouble when she finds out."

Fred's eyes lit up and he offered, "We've got an old set that he can use. It's too bad he didn't consider that Quigley is a really first rate beater. When you get to the better levels, the chasers and beaters really begin to make a difference. No offense intended, Harry."

Harry just smiled. He enjoyed the warmth and light given off by the campfire as he sat by Hannah, Susan and Hermione.

... --- ...

At eleven PM, Barty Senior called for Winky to bring him a glass. When she hadn't arrived a few seconds later, he went into his kitchen to look for her.

She wasn't there! Momentarily worried, he went into Junior's room and it was empty. He swished his arm around the bed and a second later, a feeling of dread hit his gut as if he'd been punched.

Quickly donning his traveling cloak and grabbing his wand, he silently cursed his house elf for disobeying his directive to stay with Junior and return home after the crowd had left the stadium, then he walked outside to the small apparation point in his back garden and left to go find Winky and the boy.

... --- ...

By two thirty AM, all but the heartiest die-hards had turned in for the night. Outside the western edge of the campgrounds, away from where they had publicly pitched their own tents, eight "old friends" were having a drink of ancient single malt. In the shadows beyond the glow of the campfires, Amycus Carrow, Leonard Yaxley, Peter Crabbe, Grant Goyle, Stephen Nott, Walden Macnair, and Michael Bulstrode joined their old friend Lucius Malfoy.

Nott raised his crystal tumbler and toasted, "It's time to teach the muggle embracing fools that their ways are eroding our great society."

Macnair and Bullstrode nodded. Bullstrode called, "Not everyone has forgotten the old ways."

Yaxley raised his glass and added, "We'll show the mudbloods who are the superior ones."

Carrow raised his glass and toasted, "To the Dark Lord. May his ways never be forgotten."

Malfoy sized up the group for a moment and drawled, "Yes, to the Dark Lord. What would he want us to be doing right now? A dozen years have passed and Dumbledore is still in power. We need to remind them that the old ways were good for a reason. Those of blood deserve to have the first taste of the fruits of our world. The others need to be reminded of their places, and of ours. Are the muggles ready?"

Nott nodded and replied, "I have three over there, just animals really. A peasant, his whore of a wife and their little pig of a daughter."

Malfoy nodded and noted, "Well done, Stephen. You should levitate them so all can see them for the beasts that they are. Walk at a rapid pace in order to cause everyone to run and panic. Michael, old friend, you and Walden should torch the tents to the right of our march. Peter and Grant, torch the tents on the left side. Amycus, stand by Leonard and Stephen and force a hole through the crowd as we make our way to the stream. I'll guard our flank. In the event of organized resistance, we'll apparate back here and disperse into the crowd after we have changed back into our daily garb. The very sight of us will create panic. People will remember this for months."

... --- ...

Becky Abbott snuggled closer to her husband as the campfire continued to burn. Hermione, Harry and the girls had fallen asleep by the fire. She had conjured light blankets and fluffy pillows for the kids to rest on. Arthur's boys had left about an hour ago to go back to their tent, though she wouldn't have been surprised if they had gone to meet up with some of their other friends.

She didn't worry for them – with a crowd this size, nothing could really go wrong. Ben had told her that even though most of the spectators had left after the match, some five thousand were still camped on the grounds for the evening.

... --- ...

Malfoy drawled, "Proceed." And with that command, the eight Death Eaters and the three screaming muggles walked some three hundred yards from the edge of the forest until they reached the edge of the designated Irish fans campground section. Nott levitated the three muggles into the air and began playing a sick variation of juggling them, with their arms, legs and necks flopping back and forth as they flew up and down. He cancelled the silencing charm that he had previously cast upon them, and their screams cut through the stillness of the night.

Crabbe, Goyle, Bulstrode, Yaxley and Macnair cast Incendio on five separate tents that were ahead of them, and then another five, followed by another. As they fast-walked their way through the burning mess, the darkness of the night became illuminated by the flames.

Within thirty seconds, there were scores of flaming tents and a hundred screaming witches and wizards trying their best to run away to safety.

... --- ...

Arthur Weasley had never really fallen asleep, when he heard the piercing scream of the little girl, as she was being flung about by Nott. Instantly, the normally kindly father was wide awake and saw that it was no longer dark out. A second later, he heard screams of terror, lots of them. He grabbed his wand and woke his sons. "Boys, we need to get up and leave immediately."

He looked around for another moment and asked, "Where's Harry?"

Fred replied, "He and Hermione stayed at the Abbott's site. They're probably still there."

Arthur announced, "We need to leave now. Move to the portkey site where we came in yesterday. Grab your wands and go now." Without waiting for a reply, he hurried over to the other tent to check on his daughter.

Fred and George grabbed their wands and their bag of galleons and ran out of the tent with Ron a step behind, collecting Ginny along the way. A few seconds after they left, Ron noticed a handful of gold coins on the ground and stopped for a moment to collect them. He didn't notice that his siblings had kept going.

... --- ...

Seconds after Arthur Weasley roused his children, Becky Abbott awoke with a start. She jabbed her husband as hard as she could to wake him and dashed outside the tent to check on Hannah, Susie, Hermione and Harry. He was also awake and awkwardly trying to awaken Susie whose shirt had ridden up her chest. Becky shouted, "This is no time for modesty, grab her and go!"

She splashed Hannah with an Auguamenti spell and her daughter sputtered awake. Ben stumbled out of the tent in time to see the Weasley tent set ablaze sixty yards away. Instinct kicked in and he yelled, "Run!"

Susan desperately searched for her wand. Taking a second too long, she'd just got it in her hand when Bulstrode noticed her. A bit more bloodthirsty than the others, he pointed his wand at her and a second later, a jet of purple flame sprang from its tip.

Harry had just finished waking Hermione when he happened to see Susan. He noticed the Death Eater point his wand at her and he pushed her out of the way as the man fired. As he rolled on the ground, he drew one of the wands from the holster that Moody had helped him buy. In an instant, he cast, "Reducto, Reducto, Reducto,"

at the Death Eaters. Seeing that two of them stumbled, he grabbed Susan by the arm and shouted to her and Hermione, "Run!"

He grabbed the two girls by the arm and ran fifty yards or so before Susan called for them to stop. Harry hesitated and they went a few more paces before slowing to a walk.

Susan reached into the neckline of her shirt, pulled out a muggle pen that was hooked onto a chain and whispered, "Both of you touch this with a finger." As they did, she tapped the pen with her wand and Harry and Hermione felt an uncomfortable feeling as if somehow, they had been hooked by the navel and were spirited skyward. A few seconds later, they were all sprawled out onto the back garden of their home in Welshpool.

Hermione demanded, "Who in the world were those men?"

Nonplussed, Susan looked at Harry and asked, "Are you all right?" Emotions kicking in, she pounded on his chest and sobbed, "What in Merlin's name possessed you to pull such a stupid stunt as that?" Harry looked up and she burst into tears and ran inside, screaming, "Auntie!!!"

Baffled, Harry looked over to Hermione and gently asked, "Are you all right?"

With tears in her eyes, she nodded and whimpered, "I guess so."

... --- ...

Quickly pocketing the eight galleons, Ron looked up to see a dozen people who nearly trampled him in their rush to flee, one of which knocked him down again in his hurry to leave the area. He never noticed that his wand had slipped out of his pocket and had been trampled on like a twig. By the time that he got back on his feet, he'd lost sight of his dad or brothers. He continued in the general direction that he thought that he'd originally been going. He didn't slow down until he was fifty paces or so into the woods.

Looking around, he couldn't see his brothers. In fact, away from the burning tents and campfires, the darkness of the woods claimed him and in a worried voice he called, "Fred... George?"

... --- ...

Winky the house elf was frantically trying to hold on to the younger Master Barty and had wrapped her tiny elf body tightly around his leg.

"Master Barty," she squeaked in her tiny elf voice, "We's must be going back, Master. Please."

"Let go of me," he quietly demanded. Hearing someone crashing through the bushes by them, he commanded, "Be silent." He made certain to adjust the invisibility cloak over the two of them, and Winky had momentarily stopped struggling under his direct order. Junior pointed the wand that he'd stolen from the portly man with the ridiculous green bowler hat at the shape that was emerging from the darkness. He readied the wand, the killing curse on his lips.

... --- ...

Malfoy drawled, "Stop here." He sized up the situation. Two of his colleagues had been hit by the blasting curse that someone had fired at them. The loudest screams that he could hear were those of his own forces. He didn't want to turn tail and run, so he directed, "Torch everything that's nearby. Drop those ridiculous muggles, or pike them." He cauterized Bulstrode and Yaxley's legs, which were both amputated below the knee. They both had ragged wounds and reattaching the missing limbs would be impossible, even without the inevitable questions. He took several coins out of his vest pocket, placed them on the two prone Death Eaters and touched his wand to them. A second later, each of them disappeared to the lower level of his manor home.

As he was ready to continue their march, he looked into the night sky, and in his bewilderment laid his eyes on the last thing in the world that he expected to see.

Totally confused, he hissed. "Retreat! Go back to your homes. Now."

... --- ...

When the figure in the darkness had moved twenty paces or so away from him, Junior aimed his wand away from the other figure and instead, pointed it into the sky and called, "Morsmordre." Instantly the sky lit up with the diamond-like sparkle of a large serpent slithering through and out of a skull. It was the Dark Lord's victory sign, and Junior delighted in his work. So focused in his effort, he failed to notice the two dozen or so pops that suddenly appeared near him, each yelling, "Stupefy."

While most of the jets of red light hit Ron Weasley, who had been wandering lost in the forest, Winky was hit and Barty had been hit twice. As they fell, the little elf released her grasp of her young master and Junior dropped the wand that he had been holding.

Covered beneath the invisibility cloak, he would be impossible to see.

... --- ...

Amelia came through the fireplace at the sound of her grand niece's frantic calls. She was listening to her nearly hysterical rantings when Harry and Hermione walked through the back door to see if they could help.

Hermione did her best to recap the events while Susan flung herself into Harry's arms. "About ten minutes ago, a group of perhaps eight to a dozen wizards wearing skull masks appeared. They were playing some sort of sick game juggling the nonmagical grounds keeper, and presumably his wife and little girl. The wizards were setting fire to everyone's tent in their path. They came to the Abbott campsite where we were sleeping by the campfire when Mrs. Abbott woke us up. We ran away and Susan got us here with what I believe was a wand tap activated portkey. I read all about them in *Magical Methods of Travel*, I believe the twelfth chapter."

Amelia glanced at Harry to see if he had anything to add before being subjected to hearing about the developmental history of portkeys. She asked, "Harry, are you all right?"



He replied, "I hit a few of them before I grabbed Susan and Hermione and we ran off. One of them cast something at her and I pushed her out of the way first."

She sharpened her focus on him and inquired, "Harry, what do you mean?"

He replied, "I cast Reducto at them, like we had talked about. They were Death Eaters, I'm sure of it. I hit two of them in the leg. Since I got my eyes fixed, I can see loads better. I saw it, just below the knee." He took a calming breath, glanced at Susan and added, "He fired a purple jet of flame at her. I didn't hear the spell, or see it hit anyone else. I just didn't want anything bad to happen to her."

Involuntarily flinching at the thought of what such a horrible spell would have done to her Susie, she asked, "How many did you see?"

He replied, "We only saw one group of about eight, but there could have been other groups."

... --- ...

Meanwhile aurors Kingsley Shacklebolt, Nymphadora Tonks and Michelle Wood were patrolling Diagon alley for what seemed to be the eleventh time that evening.

Tonks asked, "Tell me again why we're on this idiotic wild-goose chase tonight?"

Kingsley replied, "Direct order from Captain Scrimgeour. He got the request directly from Minister Fudge himself. He figures that there's tens of thousands of visiting wizards this week and some of them might come to the alley and cause trouble."

Tonks didn't appear impressed, but didn't say anything.

Michelle commented, "Look at it this way Tonks, it's time and a half. Let's earn our pay and walk it one more time."

... --- ...

Having run the better part of a mile, Ben gasped for breath as he held onto his Becky's and Hannah's hands. Easily in the best condition of the three, Hannah asked, "Were they ...?"

Still feeling the pain in his ribs from lack of oxygen, Ben nodded and finished her thought, "Death Eaters, in full garb. I only hope that no one was killed."

Hannah replied, "Harry hit two of them. I hope they drop dead right now."

Becky looked at her daughter in shock and choked, "What?"

Hannah replied, "One of them pointed his wand at Susan and fired some sort of purple flame curse. Harry dashed over, shoved her out of the way and hit two of them with a blasting charm, Reducto. We were just working on it in charms at year-end. I saw two of them go down as we ran off."

Ben shook his head. Hannah must have misunderstood what she had seen in all of the confusion. No one got into a fight with a Death Eater and won, least of all, a school kid.

Becky asked, "Where are Susan, Harry and Hermione Granger?"

Hannah replied, "They ran off together. She always carries a portkey on a chain around her neck, so I'm sure they're okay."

Ben suggested, "Let's go home. There was nothing that we need in the tent, and it was probably set on fire anyways. You can firecall them to make sure they got home okay."

As he spoke, the green skull appeared in the air, uncomfortably close to where they were standing. Ben took hold of Hannah, and the three of them apparated away from the campgrounds.

... --- ...

Arthur and Amos Diggory were in the midst of a heated argument with Barty Crouch, Senior, who seemed to be in some sort of excessive rage over the firing of the Dark Mark.

Amos tried the logical approach suggesting, "Barty, that's Arthur's boy. He's Harry Potter's best friend. Do you really think he'd be casting a spell to call You-Know-Who's sign? Besides, he's too young to have learned such magic."

Crouch countered, "He must have done it. Here's the wand right here."

Ron countered, "That's not my wand. Mine's right..." He reached into his jeans pocket but came up empty handed and muttered, "I must have lost it."

Amos stared at the wand for a moment and a smile came onto his face.

Crouch snarled, "What's so funny?"

Just then, Fudge waddled up to the group, wearing a hastily tied yellow bathrobe, floppy slippers and holding his trademark lime green bowler hat. He demanded, "Who was it? Have you caught the hooligan who started this riot?"

"Not exactly, Minister," smirked Diggory, as he cast *Priori Incantatum*, and watched the smoky image of the snake and skull appear from the wand, "But whoever cast the spell used your wand." He harbored no respect or admiration towards the blustering minister.

"What!?!!" ejaculated Fudge. "That's... That's... That's my wand. Who stole it? I'll have them arrested. Was it Black?"

Crouch commented, "The Weasley boy was found stunned near the wand."

Just then, Paul Smithson, an off duty DMLE administrator came up and announced, "I found this elf right by where you said the wand was found."

Crouch looked at the elf and an enormous fit of rage began building inside him.

Somewhat surprised at his attitude, Amos asked, "Barty, isn't that your elf, Winky?"

Fudge turned to the little elf and snapped, "Did you steal my wand and cast You-Know-Who's Mark?"

Arthur shook his head, and announced, "Amos, elves don't use wands. It must have been someone else who picked up Minister Fudge's wand and cast the Mark. Ron didn't do it and neither did Winky. Right Barty?"

Crouch, who had an out-of-control angry look on his face, acknowledged, "Right. The Weasley boy was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. There's been no sign of Black." He snarled, "Winky, this means clothes for you!" He threw her a glove out of his pocket and shouted, "You're a worthless excuse for an elf. Get out of my sight." With that, he kicked her a good six feet through the air as she whimpered in pain.

Even Fudge was taken aback at Crouch's apparently unprovoked attack on his house elf. "He countered, "Barty, there was no real harm done. Go home and get some rest."

A few seconds later he added, "This will all blow over. Probably just a bunch of drunken vandals. Yes, that's it, just a bunch of sore loser sports fans." He turned to Ron and spat, "Let this be a lesson to you, boy. Watch where you're going. Go home and forget about this." With that, he turned on his heel to survey the damage and work on spin control.

... --- ...

Amelia had heard enough of Harry and Susan's story to realize that there was a full-scale panic and a dirty crime scene at the campground. She fire called Connie and Rufus as well as the Auror

ready room to have them call out all of their people and go out to the campground.

Turning back to family issues, she really didn't want any of the three teens out of her sight. Susan was sobbing on Harry's shoulder. He had a bewildered look on his face, unsure as to exactly how he was to comfort the nearly hysterical girl. Hermione was sitting on the other side of the sofa looking pale. Amelia conjured a light blanket, cast a calming charm on it and put it around the three teens. A minute later, they were sleeping on the couch, clinging to each other like children with a stuffed animal. She firecalled Molly Weasley and Becky Abbott to let them know that the kids were safe.

... --- ...

Lucius stunned his two wounded friends to alleviate their pain and quiet them down. He would go find a muggle doctor, place him under the Imperius curse and have them fitted for replacement limbs before Obliviating the man. He missed the availability of a talented wizard like Augustus Rookwood, who could have transfigured and attached replacement limbs with no questions asked.

In the morning, he would go collect a doctor if he could not think of another sympathetic healer. In the meanwhile, he had one last drink before retiring to his bed.

... --- ...

Barty Couch Senior waited until the hubbub about seeing the Dark Mark cast had calmed down. The reliable reports indicated that there had been at least a half dozen Death Eaters creating the riot at the other end of the camp. The more frantic reports would place their number at nearly a hundred. He shuffled his feet along the ground as he methodically searched the tall grass and bushes by where his ex-elf had been found. Within a few minutes, he found what he was looking for and tossed a portkey onto the hidden object. In a whirl it disappeared, leaving a human sized impression molded into the tall grass.

He returned to the area where the other officials had gathered, said his goodbyes and returned to his home.

By any measurement, Barty Senior had narrowly avoided disaster at the world cup. Not only had his secret come within inches of being discovered, but also it had become increasingly evident to him that his son was nothing more than a wild, dangerous animal – a dangerous leopard that would never change its spots. Not only was he effectively harboring a dangerous wild animal in his house, for after the death of his wife, Nancy it no longer felt like a home, but also he had effectively fired the zookeeper when he'd dismissed Winky in a fit of rash anger.

In the muggle world, when a wild dangerous zoo animal bites someone, and acquires the taste of human blood, it is put down and destroyed. Senior was no fool. He knew that putting down his son, or sending the both of them back to Azkaban were the only sensible things to do. He lacked the courage to do the first, and wasn't quite ready to do the second.

Without Winky to keep an eye on the boy, he would either need to remain home, or keep the boy stunned. It was obvious that he was developing a tolerance to the Imperius curse. The other option was to construct a cage and keep him there like the animal that he was. He re-stunned junior as he reconsidered his options.

He was all but certain that that idiot Fudge would put the drunken vandals spin on the entire evening and attempt to shift some of the blame to Amelia, like he always did. For Merlin's sake, it was his wand that had been stolen and had been used to fire the Mark. Pouring himself another glass of single malt, he concluded that he could work at home for a while and use that arrogant overly ambitious idiot Weatherby as a runner for a few weeks until he could get another house elf or even decide to do what he knew needed to be done.

As he finished his third glass, he thought about going to see Dumbledore and confessing his sins. As the potent beverage entered into his system, he closed his eyes and slept.

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McGonagall gave the old scribe a stern look. She was ready to admonish him for including gratuitous scenes of titillation when it occurred to her that he could have been much more graphic in his recording of the terror and brutal violence of that night. Naturally, the Prophet had downplayed the violence in its depiction of the events.

She wasn't pleased with the scribe's depiction of one of her lions as a complete, wanking, buffoon, but did recognize that his description of the events could have placed the young man in a much worse light than he had.

After he had left, she noticed that he had accidentally left his well-worn copy of Joemjackson's report – Not the Only Redhead on her desk, and noticed that a few of the parchments at the end of the report were new. She picked it up and read it with great interest while she waited for the distinctive sound of the scribe's steel horse to return.

## Chapter Eight

### Junior and Senior

Friday 26 August

By four AM, every auror in Britain and the entire investigative staff were on the scene, either interviewing people or assisting the investigators in keeping the crime scene comparatively uncontaminated. Scrimgeour felt guilty and angry for going against his better judgment and placing extra aurors on duty in Diagon Alley, which Shacklebolt had reported to be deserted for their entire shift.

They interviewed dozens of people, and while their stories varied wildly in some aspects, there were some points of consistency.

One – Death Eaters in full garb had been spotted – the numbers were at least a dozen.

Two – Muggles had been levitated and used as human juggling balls.

Three – There were no bodies found.

Four – At least a hundred tents had been set ablaze.

Five – Someone must have fought back. Two feet and lower legs were found. The feet were wearing different shoes.

Six – The Dark Mark had been fired about a half mile from the closest area of the burning tents.

As directed, the investigators filed their reports directly to Amelia.

... --- ...

By five AM, Rita Skeeter and the editor of the Daily Prophet were in Fudge's office with an hour to go before deadline. With each retelling, he became more confident in his "facts" as he told his tale. "It was dark. Probably just a few foreign sports fans wearing traveling cloaks, who'd had too much to drink. Yes, there was some damage that may



have started from an out of control campfire, but the entire affair was blown completely out of proportion. I spoke with the officials that were on the scene. At no time were any witches or wizards in direct danger. As a sign of good faith, the Ministry will pay for any damages to anyone's tent. We don't know who decided to display You-Know-Who's sign as some sort of sick prank..." He went on, and the editor and Skeeter glanced at each other as Fudge continued to apply varnish to his tale. They had both been at the match, and from a safe distance had seen the riot first hand as it had taken place. Skeeter's photographer had taken a clear picture of the Dark Mark shimmering in the air – a sick reminder of dark days past.

On the way out, they met Ben Abbott, who gladly shared his experience with Skeeter. She needed this story and was more than willing to protect a source.

... --- ...

Back at the castle, as the owls delivered their papers a few hours later and flew off, Minerva glanced at the headline and covered her mouth as if she was about to be ill. The headline read, Death Eaters attack Quidditch World Cup. Beneath it was a photo of the Dark Mark shimmering in the dark sky like some sick version of a muggle helium parade float.

Poppy looked on with her friend as she turned the page and gasped.

### Five Thousand Cowards, One Hero

The Attack at the Quidditch World Cup illustrated the worst of the British Wizarding World. Reliable reports place at least a dozen Death Eaters, yes He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's followers on the scene. With them were a handful of badly molested muggles. Facing them were some five thousand of Britain's witches, wizards, and their children.

According to eyewitnesses, only one wizard stood against the Death Eaters. One unidentified wizard out of five thousand. According to witnesses, several Death Eaters may have been injured. Ministry Aurors or investigators were unavailable for comment at the time we

had to go to press. St. Mungo's should report any suspicious injuries to Ministry officials.

Minerva wondered about the news that she'd just read. Albus had been at the castle the entire evening. Who could have been brave enough, or foolish enough to stand up to a band of Death Eaters?

Beneath it was another story.

Who fired the Dark Mark?

Unidentified Ministry sources claim that the wand that was used to cast the Dark Mark was in fact recovered. The owner of the wand was not identified, and at the time that we had to go to press, no suspects were identified. Continued on page 7

She finished the article on the other page. Uncharacteristically, there was no wild speculation regarding Black sightings, or aliens having been responsible for the act. Minerva had the feeling that the writer had been uncomfortably close to the action, and hadn't felt the need to embellish an already frightening event.

... --- ...

Arthur Weasley wisely sat silently while his wife lit into him and the three of her sons who had attended the event the previous evening. After the loss of her brothers, she still harbored the fear of losing another family member to the dark. Having seen the stark photos of the burning tents and the glistening skull and snake, she needed no additional evidence to know that darker times were returning.

Arthur kept one ear open as she continued her rant. He recalled hearing snatches of conversation as he focused on happy thoughts.

"... Completely irresponsible..."

"... Lost your wand..."

"... Could have been killed..."

“... Abandoned your friends...”

“... Foolish gambling...”

“... Saved months for that money...”

“... Why can't you be more like Harry Potter?”

“... Running around getting lost...”

“... Haven't heard a word from Percy...”

As she kept going, Ron silently grew angrier. The coins that he'd picked up that had caused all of this trouble had turned out to be leprechaun gold and had vanished shortly after they had arrived home. It was Harry and Hermione who had abandoned him. They should have stayed with him.

... --- ...

Amelia was annoyed. None of her people had mentioned a word about finding the wand that had cast the Dark Mark charm. There were ten Ministry employees, including Fudge, who were authorized to make official comments to the press. They knew the protocols and used their name in reports. While she had little doubt regarding the Prophet's claim that someone from the Ministry had provided information regarding the wand, she was equally certain that the story was neither completely accurate, nor complete.

Connie, Anna and Rufus reported back to her home at nine. They confirmed that two lower legs had been found and that both men (based upon the shoes) had lost a lot of blood. St. Mungo's hadn't admitted any patients with missing limbs, but either man could have been treated at a muggle hospital or magically. They had identified the campsites that had been destroyed, and Arthur's department had been given the task of processing the claims that Fudge had offered to pay.

Finally she got around to Scrimgeour and the placement of the squad of aurors in Diagon Alley. “Why in the world would you have assigned

a hit witch and three aurors to Diagon Alley of all places? It must have been deserted.”

Scrimgeour admitted, “It was. Shack reported that they didn’t see a living soul all evening. I acted on a direct request from Fudge. He said that he’d gotten a tip that there might be trouble.”

“Obviously there was,” replied Bones. “I’d be interested to know who gave Fudge the information. Were they simply wrong, or was it an intentional misdirection?”

“Maybe both,” suggested Scrimgeour. “Maybe Fudge believed the information, and maybe the informant had an idea what was really going to happen.”

“How many groups were reliably reported?” asked Bones.

“One to three,” replied Connie. “Certainly there was at least one group that torched all of the tents, but the casting of... Riddle’s Mark was in a completely different part of the campground. The group that lost the limbs probably left shortly after they were counterattacked. The Mark was fired at almost the same time. I can’t see the first group firing the Mark as any sort of victory celebration, having been bloodied so badly. The muggles were treated for broken bones and obliterated. There were dozens of sightings, but they could have been anyone in a dark cloak.”

Anna added, “However many there really were, the world is getting to be a more dangerous place.”

... --- ...

Saturday 27 August

Outside London, in a neighborhood of large upscale homes, a short, somewhat mousy haired man was pushing a baby pram down the sidewalk. In and of itself, that wasn’t so odd – a father getting some exercise pushing his infant down the sidewalk after dinner, but what was strange was that the man appeared to be having a conversation with the infant.

“Master, I... I could do it.”

“Do not underestimate Bartimius Crouch, Wormtail. He is a very capable wizard. We will do it as planned. Push the pram to within five feet of the front door. Ring the bell, assume your rat form and position yourself six feet away from the door, right at the edge of the house. He won't see you.”

Pettigrew did as he was told. His master was covered by a thin blanket, his wand positioned so that it was already aimed in the direction that they expected Crouch to come from.

Pettigrew then pushed the doorbell, which gave a loud ring. Immediately he assumed his rat form and waited. Five seconds... Ten seconds... Fifteen seconds...

... --- ...

Inside the house, Crouch Senior cursed himself that he'd dismissed Winky. He stunned his recently recaptured son, set his wand down, and covered him up with an invisibility cloak that he'd procured.

The doorbell gave a second ring. He cursed his blasted nosey muggle neighbor. She was always coming over at inopportune times, bringing meals or whatever.

He walked quickly to the door, unlocked the latch and opened it. Instead of Lucile Holt, he was surprised to see a baby pram with a squirming bundle wrapped inside. Looking around in the gathering darkness, he couldn't see anyone and assumed that some young muggle had abandoned her child at his door. He walked closer to the cart and pulled back the blanket to see the infant. Momentarily shocked at the hideous sight, he never heard the word stupefy as the jet of red light hit him squarely in the chest.

Pettigrew quickly assumed his human form and dragged Crouch into his own house. Seconds later, he returned for his master and brought him inside. They now were at the riskiest part of the plan. They had to assume that no one else except Crouch Senior and his son Barty

Junior would be at home. Bertha had mentioned a house elf named Winky, and they both knew that the elves had magic of their own.

“Find Barty, Wormtail. Check the sofas and bedrooms. It is quite possible that he’s been hidden under an invisibility cloak.”

A few minutes later, Wormtail called, “I have found him, Master. He appears to have been stunned. No one else is in the house.”

“Very good, Wormtail. Bring me to him.”

... --- ...

A few hours later, Senior woke up. He was in the room where Junior was kept, sitting on a chair facing his son. That wasn’t so odd, but there was another man sitting on a chair off to the side holding a wand and what appeared to be a bundle of clothes. He noticed that he was tightly bound and that his son was holding a wand.

“Hello Dad. You ready to join up with Mum?”

The last things he remembered were the horrible figure in the blanket looking at him and his son shouting, “Imperio!”

... --- ...

If Bertha Jorkins had been a wealth of information, Crouch Senior was the mother lode. The problem was, he couldn’t simply be stripped of his memories and discarded like she had been. Riddle had need of Crouch’s position within the Ministry.

Therein would be the tricky part – The Imperius curse was fairly easy to administer on a short-term basis. It was no particular feat for a competent wizard to cast the curse on an unsuspecting victim, and force him to torture his own family while the Death Eater was in the man’s presence, then wake him up so that the victim could see the results of his own hand. At each juncture, the victim could be told what to do.

Long-term casting was an entirely different matter. It had been simple enough for Senior to place his son under the curse with the ongoing instruction, Sit in your room and stare at the wall. It would be completely different to hold a victim under the curse for months on end and tell them to Act normally and tell no one about what was going on. Twelve years ago, Riddle could have accomplished the task with some effort and with weekly reinforcement.

His forces currently consisted of an out of practice, supposedly dead but loyal follower, and an incompetent, but reasonably useful, one-trick pony of a wizard, who was practically the dictionary definition of a lackey.

In order to get to the next stage, a real body, he would need three things. First, he would need the bone of his father. He didn't know, but believed that his father was, in fact, buried in a grave marked with his headstone, in the graveyard in Little Hangleton; thus readily available.

Wormtail would be good for the second requirement – Flesh given willingly from a servant. He would instruct him to cut off a hand or a foot and make a big show of conjuring a replacement limb after he had been returned to his body and had called his remaining Death Eaters.

It was the last requirement - Blood from an enemy – that intrigued him.

Blood – Blood made all of the difference. His own ability to converse with serpents and his innate power came from blood, passed down generation from generation back to his ancestor, Salazar Slytherin himself. Thus the more powerful the wizard who he stole the blood from, the stronger that he would be.

That left him with two possibilities – Albus Dumbledore or Harry Potter. The thought of either possibility excited him greatly. Dumbledore was arguably the most powerful foe that was still living. He had personally tested the old wizard's power on several occasions; each time they had fought to a draw. But realistically, his current forces couldn't hope to subdue the Hogwarts Headmaster and

Riddle wasn't ready to call his old forces back. Too many of them were too strong, too ambitious, and insufficiently loyal to not attempt to secure some unacceptable advantage given his current, weakened condition. Lord Voldemort did not share power.

The other possibility was the boy of the prophecy – Harry Potter. He would only be a fourth year wizard. Riddle wished for perhaps the thousandth time that Snape had reported the entire prophecy, or had never mentioned it. The Potters were of good, strong blood. The father had put up a serious fight that evening; one of the best that Riddle had engaged in. The mother was intelligent – amazingly so for a mudblood. Capturing the boy would be difficult, but possible. They would need Crouch Senior – alive and functioning.

His thoughts were interrupted by Wormtail, who had been keeping watch as they plotted their next moves in Crouch's kitchen. "What is it, Wormtail?"

"A wizard just apparated into the back garden, Master."

Voldemort replied, "Bartimeus, have your father show our guest in. Perhaps he will be useful to us."

A red haired wizard of perhaps nineteen entered the door after the others had hidden and announced, "Mr. Crouch. I have some papers for you to sign."

Senior replied, "Er, thank you, Weatherby."

Riddle muttered to himself, "Perfect."

... --- ...

Lucius sat in silence as he sipped his single malt and pondered the events of the last month. Four things niggled at him – The brand on his arm, the resistance encountered after the world cup, the appearance of the Dark Lord's Mark shortly after their attack and a notice that he had received a week earlier.



The brand had all but disappeared twelve years ago when Potter had defeated the Dark Lord. In June, a faint outline had reappeared. It grew a bit more distinct in early July and had become dark enough so he had seen Narcissa notice it, though she had wisely refrained from mentioning it. In all honesty, Malfoy had no desire to return to his previous life as a subordinate to a man without principles.

Equally surprising was the fact that some fool had made an attempt to fight back during the brief march that they had made following the world cup. Granted, the wizard had made no better than a few lucky shots, which had made contact when fired into a group, but in years past, there was such fear of the Death Eaters that most victims simply froze up in terror. Yaxley and Bulstrode had been fitted with replacement limbs from the Imperiused muggle doctor, as a temporary fix until they could be properly healed after the noise quieted down a bit.

Deciphering the real motivation behind the Dark Lord's direction that he purchase the property in Little Hangleton years ago had not been difficult. Malfoy had been somewhat surprised to have been notified that the old caretaker had recently been found dead on the property. He hadn't thought about the old man's death at the time, but now it appeared to be less of a coincidence than he'd originally imagined.

What really disturbed Malfoy was the fact that the Dark Lord's Mark had been cast into the night sky. He was fairly certain that of the thirty-two former Death Eaters who had evaded prison at the end of the Dark Lord's reign, they had been the only eight attending the world cup. He mentally ticked through the list. Snape had remained at the school, while Greyback had refused McNair's offer to come. Carrow's wife was ill. Borgun and Burke were on the continent shopping for their marginal items. Karkarov was probably still hiding out in the relative safety that Durmstrang could provide. The others were on holiday for the summer, in or out of prison as seemed to be their destiny, or dead.

That said; it was inconceivable to Malfoy that a ministry employee would have cast the Mark. Pettigrew was out there somewhere, on the run and hiding. His wizarding skills were so bad that Lucius

seriously doubted that the rat could even cast the Mark. He drained his glass and went to find his weak excuse of a son.

... --- ...

Tuesday 30 August

Evil schemes required resources. Currently, they had very few. A search of the house resulted in finding the remains of Junior's snapped wand and no more than fifty galleons. What was useful was the discovery of Senior's Gringotts key. An hour later, Crouch, accompanied by Junior under his invisibility cloak, took the Knight bus to Diagon Alley, where, for fifty galleons, Senior purchased ten doses of Polyjuice potion.

The potion maker remarked, "Barty, I've told ya, yer wasting yer money. Ya canna keep using yer Nancy's hair an givin it to a prostitute. If'n a person has gone on, the potion'll only last for a few seconds."

Under the cloak, Junior stifled a laugh. To the world, his father was 'Mr. By-the-rulebook-stickler'. In reality, he'd spent years picking and choosing which rules to follow for himself. A few minutes later, they were back on the Knight Bus.

Four hours later, Junior, looking like his father, walked into Gringotts. Neither he nor his master was certain if the goblins could see through a Polyjuice potion disguise, but they didn't want to risk losing Senior down in the goblin vaults.

"Key, please."

Five minutes later, Junior stepped out of the cart and walked into the family vault for the first time in over twenty years. He had accompanied his father a time or two when he was a boy before starting school, but his father was a private man and rarely discussed money at the kitchen table. Junior was surprised at the amount of gold in the vault. When Senior and his wife had been married, his dad and his mum had spent nearly all of the money that they'd made each month. Now, there were nearly fifty thousand galleons.

Unsuccessful trysts with prostitutes aside, Senior lived a quiet life in the last years, and generally managed to save about half of his salary. Junior filled the satchel with twenty thousand galleons and attempted a featherweight charm. His dad's wand was a horrible fit and the charm barely had an impact. He took a half dose of the dreadful tasting potion and made his way to Ollivander's.

"Barty Crouch, 10 1/8th inches, unicorn hair made of birch wood. How can I help you?"

Junior replied, "My wand hasn't been working well for me since my Nancy died. I think I need a new one." Lying had always come easily to the young man.

The old wandmaker measured him and he tried a few with little success. Finally he got good results from one and the ancient wizard remarked, "Curious."

Crouch asked, "What's so curious?"

Ollivander replied, "10 7/8th inches with dragon heartstring and black oak. I had once made a wand very similar to this for your son."

Crouch remarked, "Maybe I've grown a heart and gone soft." He paid the money and left before the potion began to wear off.

Another half dose later, he had visited a different apothecary and purchased a large sack of potion ingredients. He went to a third shop and purchased the key ingredient, boomslang skin. Unfortunately, its only other common use besides Polyjuice was for a male sexual dysfunction cure, and the female sales clerk did more than her share of tittering as he purchased three sacks of the dried skin.

As she handed him his change, in an overly sweet voice, she remarked, "Good luck with your little problem, Mr. Crouch." She and her fellow clerk burst into a fit of laughter as he closed the door to the shop. As a politician, he was no longer a popular man.

... --- ...

Wednesday 31 August

Alastor Moody was packing for school when he heard the scream from the girl out in his back alleyway. It sounded like she was being attacked. He looked outside and a man was assaulting a young mother who apparently had been out pushing her baby in a pram. He opened up his back door to assist her and was immediately stunned.

Junior transfigured the girl into a cat and whacked her on the head with a cricket bat a moment later. Unfortunately, one of the neighbors happened to have looked out of their window at that instant and made a call to summon the police.

“Get him inside,” hissed Riddle. “There has been far too much noise.”

Junior helped Pettigrew get Moody inside while Riddle kept watch from the stroller. He heard the police siren sound, and summoned the house, which had the effect of pulling the baby pram towards the back of the immovable house. Peter heard the noise, picked up his master, brought him inside and closed the door behind him.

“Now what?” asked Pettigrew, who was more than a bit frightened.

“The police have been summoned,” directed Junior. “Cast the Imperius curse on him, and have him answer the door.”

“I can’t perform that spell,” admitted Pettigrew.

“Fine, I’ll do it myself,” replied Junior in an annoyed voice.

“No!!!” hissed Riddle. “You cannot hold the spell properly against two wizards at once. I’ll do it myself. Hide us under your cloak. Imperio!” Get up and answer the door, commanded Riddle to Moody.

Moody did as he was told, but was struggling the entire time. He had been trained for breaking the curse, but complied and opened the door.

Officer Stevens looked at the broken down old man who had answered the door and was taken aback by his odd appearance. He saw a man in his seventies, wearing an old fashioned set of long underwear with the button flap in back and a wooden leg answer the door. He was missing a part of his nose from some old injury and had an odd-looking artificial glass eye strung about his face.

The old man answered, "What do you want?"

Officer Stevens pushed back a bit and replied, "We had a report of a young mother being attacked outside. May I come in, Mr. ..?"

"Moody. Alastor Moody." Stevens let himself in and looked around the clearly magical home, which, to his eyes, just looked like the house of an eccentric old veteran.

Moody was trying hard to fight the curse. He made a big effort and his arm gave a wild jerk.

Riddle commanded him, Sit down. Twelve years ago, Moody would have been no match for his mental commands – hardly any wizard would, but at the moment, Riddle could barely command him.

Moody sat down and repeated, "What do you want?"

Officer Stevens was slightly taken back by abruptness of the old man, but inquired, "We had a report of a young mother being attacked out back. Did you see or hear anything?"

After a pause, Moody replied, "Just a stray cat knocking over the trash bins. I went outside and gave it a whack on the head." He flinched again.

Stevens gave the man a startled look. Something was queer about him. He went outside to confer with his partner who had been interviewing the neighbor who had made the original call.

Inside the house, Riddle called to Pettigrew, "Stun Moody."

Pettigrew complied and Moody fell out of the chair, knocking it over as he landed on the floor with a fairly loud thump.

Junior surveyed the situation outside and observed, "There are four policemen out in the back, looking around."

... --- ...

Amos Diggory fire-called Arthur Weasley. One of Diggory's aids that monitored the police calls had reported that the police had been called to Moody's building for a disturbance. He advised, "Arthur, you need to go to Moody's house and straighten out the police."

Arthur looked delighted at the prospect. He would get to talk with the pleesemen! He could probably talk them into demonstrating their firelegs that some of them had if they had some extra time. He put on what he felt was his best muggle outfit, consisting of sandals, blue jeans and a woman's blouse and appeared a street away from Moody's residence. He walked up as quickly as he could.

... --- ...

Stevens and his fellow officers conferred. There was evidence of a struggle of some type and there was the empty baby pram out back. The old man claimed that he had heard a disturbance and found a stray cat rummaging around in the trash. The old man admitted to whacking the animal in the head with a cricket bat, but that wasn't why they'd been called out. Animal control could take care of him.

Just then, a middle-aged red haired man, who clearly was a cross dresser, walked up to them and inquired, "May I be of some assistance?"

Stevens inquired, "Sir, what is your name and do you live around here?"

The man replied, "My name is Arthur Weasley." He presented a badge and an identification card, which appeared authentic, but was from a department of the MI6 branch that Stevens wasn't familiar with.

Stevens replied, "We're here on a report of an assault, but there may have been a multiple abduction. The old man who lives there might have seen something."

Arthur nodded and said, "I'm familiar with Mad.. err Alastor Moody. He is a retired ministry worker – A good man, if a bit eccentric."

"That would be the pot calling the kettle black," muttered Stevens to himself.

... --- ...

"That's Arthur Weasley!" exclaimed Pettigrew looking out the window through an open sliver of the drawn blinds. He's acquainted with Moody."

"If he proves to be a bother, kill him," hissed Riddle. "We can always stun and oblivate the coppers." They had done nothing to make his life easier as a child and he was quite willing to kill any and all of them if necessary, but knew that now wasn't the time. "Perhaps he'll get rid of them for us."

"He sent them away," exclaimed Junior a minute later. "Now he's coming towards the door."

"Awaken Moody," directed Riddle. Pettigrew drew his wand and awakened the auror and a moment later, Riddle pointed his wand and cast. "Imperio."

Open the door and get rid of him as soon as you can, directed Riddle as Junior picked up the chair an instant before he and Pettigrew joined their master under the invisibility cloak.

Moody opened the door and greeted the man, "Arthur."

Weasley gave the room a quick scan, but he wasn't really looking for anything. He asked, "What happened, Mad Eye?"

Tell him, there was a cat outside, and you got rid of it, commanded Riddle.

Moody gave a jerk, as he desperately tried to break the curse, which startled Weasley.

Tell him, commanded Riddle

“There was a cat outside making a racket and I went out and whacked it with an old bat,” remarked Moody as he’d been commanded to. He gave his arm another jerk.

Moody was known for being a jumpy auror, but his behavior today was unusual even for him. Weasley looked around the room again, and noticed Moody’s traveling trunk. He stood up to go over and take a look at it.

Under the cloak, Junior was ready to cast the killing curse on the nosey man. One step nearer and he’d fire.

Arthur had a feeling that something was wrong. He glanced around again, but was distracted as Moody’s shoulder gave another lurch.

Sit down, commanded Voldemort, who was nearly exhausted from the effort of holding the strong willed man.

His own resistance wearing thin, Moody complied.

Tell him you’re tired and need to finish packing, commanded Riddle.

“I’m tired... I need to finish packing,” said Moody with much less emotion than before.

“Okay,” replied Arthur. “Have a good term, Alastor.” With that, Moody’s last hope of rescue walked out the back door.

After Arthur closed the door, Riddle told Wormtail, “Stun the auror. We have much to do.”

Moody gave a final jerk, broke free and lunged at Wormtail.

“Avada Ke...”



“No,” commanded Riddle. He pointed his overly large wand at Moody and hissed, “Stupify.” Moody and Wormtail both hit the floor with a thud.

Junior stopped his curse that would have ended Moody’s life a split second before finishing it.

As Wormtail got up and retrieved his wand, Riddle hissed, “We need the auror alive. Remove his clothing and bind him. Take his magical eye and his wooden leg and shear off a few locks of his hair. He is a formidable adversary.” He looked at the magical trunk and directed, “Barty, find his keys. Let’s see what he has packed in his seven-compartment trunk.”

... --- ...

Thursday 1 September

Amelia woke early and got dressed for the day. As with each year, she had mixed feelings about the start of school. A part of her wished that it was still July to allow her more time to spend with Susie and Harry, but she knew that the sands of time waited for no one.

She debated whether to tell the teens about the Tri-Wizard tournament, but didn’t have any real perspective to add, other than relief that neither of them would be allowed to compete due to their ages.

As was his habit, Harry came down first. She greeted him and asked, “Are you excited for school to start?”

Harry thought for a moment and replied, “When I was staying with the Dursleys, I kept a calendar on the wall each summer and marked off the days until I could leave. Now... I guess what I mean to say is, thank you. Thank you for taking me in, and, well, everything. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come that morning. I don’t really know how to properly thank you for what you’ve done.

Amelia looked at him with a parent's love for their child. She debated about suggesting that they stay in contact with Moody, eat their vegetables, write once a week, owl Rufus and Connie as well but decided against it. Susie had been open and complete in her letters home, and she could always find an excuse to drop in at the school if she had any serious questions, or if something important came up. She replied, "Just take care of yourself, and take care of Susie. Try to have a quiet year, but keep your eyes open."

Harry nodded and replied, "I will."

A few hours later, the two teens walked onto platform 9 &  $\frac{3}{4}$ .

... --- ...

Nothing was going right at the Moody residence. While Harry and Amelia were having breakfast, Junior was feverously trying to learn how to use Moody's magical eye to no avail. To make matters worse, he could barely walk the length of Moody's living room without falling while wearing Moody's infernal wooden leg.

Pettigrew couldn't make a potion properly to save his life and Riddle's hands were way too small to be of any use.

By noon, Junior, in the image of his father, had purchased an additional several hundred galleons worth of Polyjuice potion, and had enough to get through class and mealtimes for the first two weeks. Since it took a month to brew, he would need to acquire more until he could produce a sustainable supply for the remainder of the year.

Wormtail suggested forcing Senior to make some, but after seeing Moody flinch, they didn't want to risk their meager resources on something that could so easily be ruined.

Riddle searched Moody's memories for any conversations that he might have had with Dumbledore regarding school and concluded that Moody was expected to have moved in before dinnertime. He was about to suggest that Junior (in the form of Moody) should get

ready and leave when Junior/Moody tripped and fell flat on the floor with a crash.

Perhaps another hour of practice was in order.

... --- ...

The last carriage had been filled with students and already had left for the school when Junior/Moody apparated to the Hogsmeade station. Junior cursed his wooden leg as he dragged his trunk along and hobbled his way towards the school.

Dinner had already started.

... --- ...

Fred and George were having fun at their younger brother's expense when they noticed Dumbledore looking towards the entrance doors to the Great Hall. They saw a strange looking man with a knarred looking face and a large walking stick hobble his way towards Dumbledore, mutter a few words and take his place at the staff table.

The hall had grown silent when Dumbledore gave Moody a sympathetic look and announced, "I would like to introduce you to your new Defense instructor, Professor Moody. Professor Moody is a retired Master Auror and is eminently qualified to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Dumbledore gave a laugh when someone coughed, "Lockhart" and replied, "For those of you who hadn't otherwise inquired, former professor Lockhart is still recuperating at St. Mungo's. Let us wish the best for Professor Moody."

... --- ...

Hannah looked around the hall when Dumbledore announced the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Fred and George Weasley didn't look surprised in the least. Their brother Ron looked greatly angered when it was announced that there would be no quidditch matches for the year. Harry looked relieved when Dumbledore announced the age

restriction. At her own table, Sue's expression mirrored Harry's, while Cedric Diggory had a hopeful look on his face.

Like most of the other students, she wondered how the new term would play out.

Oc-OC-oc

Professor McGonagall was livid at the old scribe. She recapped the changes that he had had the audacity to report on, that varied from "Her" original report.

Amelia's involvement with Harry

Harry knows Rufus & Connie

Harry has met Moody

Harry & others know the prophecy

Several officials believe that Riddle is back

Amelia knows that Fudge covered up the theft

She was ready to place Crow in detention for the rest of his life, when she noticed that he was drinking some sort of amber colored potion that apparently offered medicinal benefits similar to a cheering charm.

After he set the goblet down, and McGonagall's rant had returned to a normal volume that he was able to tune out, Crow wondered about Malfoy. "She" had originally reported him as Voldemorts most loyal follower. Yet in Her final report, he clearly wasn't. Crow believed that the dozen years in between had been too good to Malfoy, and he was probably shocked to have seen the Mark cast at the World Cup.

Crow also wondered about the Polyjuice potion. When McGonagall had first lent him Her report from 1992, She had indicated that a batch took a month to brew, and that a batch made a limited quantity of doses. Assuming that due to their inexperience, Harry and friends had accidentally taken three times the minimum required to create a

change, and that taking too much at once does not achieve a longer change; rather a steady small dose works best, there still was a problem. According to Her report, Hermione had stolen a quantity of key ingredients sufficiently large that had been noticed by Professor Snake.

McGonagall watched as the old scribe opened a cold can of a pre-packaged potion, apparently brewed by a slim friend of his, Bud Light, and considered the problem. He narrowed the complex Polyjuice formula down to the essential element – Boomslang skin. If one batch of the Polyjuice potion created as many as ten doses which would collectively last as much as a day, and that one batch used a noticeable amount of the precious snakeskin, then having Junior pose as Moody for an entire school year must have brought fear to the slithery little boomslangs on a worldwide basis. He wondered what the other scribes thought about the idea.

McGonagall recalled the events quite differently. She specifically recalled being suspicious of him and was ready to admonish the old scribe on that very point, when she realized that she was the only one in her office. She noticed that, as usual, the old crow hadn't properly cleaned up after himself, and had left a half full, Hagrid-sized jug of a golden potion that apparently had been named after the scribe and also found a slip of parchment marked "The Real Us" and a number 4605681. On a whim, she sampled the potion...

After a second sip of the amber potion, she recalled the old scribes suggestion that she leave him a note regarding his report. She poured herself another small glass of the remarkable portion and penned her review.

## Chapter Nine

### Full Disclosure

Friday 2 September

... --- ...

Junior was seated at Moody's desk looking at a jar of large spiders that Hagrid had collected for him. The damned eye gave him headaches and that infernal wooden leg was a nightmare to get around with. To make matters worse, Moody's primary wand wouldn't so much as give off a spark for him, so he substituted the one that he'd recently bought from Ollivander.

Dumbledore had pulled him aside after the feast last night and had made the unusual request that he show the fourth through seventh years the unforgivable curses and point out that there is no effective counter-curse for them.

Their original plan had been to simply hand the Potter boy a portkey disguised as a parchment and activate it by tapping his wand to it as the boy was reading it. As it turned out, the inside of the castle itself was warded both ways against portkey use, so they would have to try something similar outside the castle. The Dark Lord had recommended using the Tri-Wizard trophy as a back-up plan, and now it appeared that would have to work, unless he was able to try something during one of the Hogsmeade visits.

Infiltrating the tournament would be difficult and time consuming. He would have to acquire access to the goblet and alter the seven-hundred-year-old charms to have the cup think that there were four schools, then enter Potter's name as the sole contestant of the fourth school. He would also have to write the entry slip so that the name of the fourth school was invisible when it came out and credibly suggest that it would be in everyone's best interest not to simply cancel the tournament and redraw; and instead have Potter compete the best that he could. Like any plan, it sounded easy when they were at his father's house discussing it over brandies. He would have to discuss

the specifics with his master in the next week or two before the champions' names were entered.

In the short term, he needed to assimilate into the school and do a credible job teaching 35 hours of classes a week, quickly acquire some additional Polyjuice potion, and begin brewing his own supply.

Of immediate concern, he had class starting in five minutes. He would demonstrate the three curses this week and, based on his conversation with the old headmaster, actually place some of the students under the Imperius curse the next week.

... --- ...

Ron and Susan sat at their respective tables thinking about the new school year. Both of them missed having breakfast with Harry, who was currently sitting with Neville, Hermione, Fred, George and the girls from the Quidditch team. After Professor McGonagall passed out the class schedules, Susan walked over to compare hers with Harry's. "Which classes do we have together this year?"

Harry handed her his schedule. She looked at it and observed, "This is good. We have Herbology together on Monday mornings, Runes together right after lunch, Charms together on Wednesday mornings and Defense together on Friday mornings."

Harry replied, "Do you think we know enough to do second level Runes?"

She nodded and replied, "We must. We passed the first-year test last week. Hermione was really kind to have helped us so much. We should get her something to thank her. If you're ready to go, I'll go get my book and meet you outside Professor Moody's classroom." She gave him a sly smile and suggested, "Maybe we can sit together this year?"

Harry smiled back and replied, "Sounds good. See ya."

When she had left and he was walking back to his dorm, Ron caught up with him and asked, "Which classes do you have?"

Harry handed Ron his schedule as they walked. Ron looked at it and asked, "What happened to Divination this afternoon?"

Harry replied, "I got sick of making stuff up and hearing that old bat go off predicting my death every week."

Ron argued, "Yeah well... but at least it was easy."

Harry disagreed, saying, "With Voldemort out there, I don't need easy. I need additional skills."

Ron flinched. "Don't say his name!"

Harry didn't reply, as he didn't want to start an argument. They got their books and walked to the Defense classroom. Neville was sitting next to Hannah who was sitting next to Susan who had saved a place for Harry between herself and Hermione. Harry sat in the saved seat and Ron scowled as he sat in the vacant seat in the back by Ernie Macmillan.

... --- ...

Two hours later, Harry left the Defense classroom, rubbing his eyes. For some reason, he had gotten a headache in the class. He hadn't had any problems with his new glasses before but he really hadn't worn them much during the summer since he'd had his eyes healed.

Susan watched as Ron yapped to Seamus about how cool the new Professor was and Hermione and Hannah comforted Neville who had appeared to have been shaken from watching Professor Moody cast the Cruciatus curse on the spider.

As they walked along, Harry commented, "Professor Moody seems different in class than I would have expected."

Susan replied, "Maybe it was just the topic. Like he said, 'it's not nice.' They were all horrible. Are you all right?"



Harry nodded in agreement. Somehow, he had lived through the killing curse. Little did he know that he would become much more familiar with the other two curses as well.

... --- ...

After attempting to make a quick appearance at dinner and getting stopped in the castle corridors for what seemed to have been a half-dozen times, Junior finally made it to his quarters where he sealed the door shut. He unstrapped that God forsaken artificial leg and that infernal eye and waited. Ten minutes later, the Polyjuice potion wore off. With a great shudder, Junior shook his head and stiffly stood on his own two feet. He had been required to take one extra dose today to maintain Moody's form as dinner dragged on.

He mentally thanked Pettigrew for mentioning Moody's habit about only drinking out of his own flask. Either the man was a complete alcoholic or a paranoid lunatic, sipping something out of his ridiculous flask day in and day out. Fortunately, Dumbledore seemed to be aware of, and indulgent about the habit, and it suited his current needs quite well. He could hold five doses in the flask, more than enough to get through a morning or afternoon.

He looked at the potion instructions that his Master had provided for him. Lord Voldemort had advised him not to attempt a double batch, rather to make several batches concurrently. According to the instructions and his own experience, a one-quart finished batch would yield enough potion for about ten three-ounce doses. That would be enough potion to last him a day if he stayed out of sight as much as possible.

He had what seemed to be a lifetime supply of lacewing flies and a good supply of knotgrass and leeches. He also had enough of the difficult to obtain ingredient, the boomslang snake skin to last for several months. The final ingredient, the powered bicorn horn was easy enough to purchase, though it was quite expensive. He hadn't brought enough gold along the last time that he'd gone out with his father and only had enough bicorn horn powder to last for the initial batches and a few weeks afterwards.

As his master had suggested, it was quite easy to obtain twenty two-quart cauldrons from the school stock. By three AM, he had finished the initial steps on all twenty batches and was relieved that the warmed cauldrons didn't give off a noxious aroma that he would have to explain away.

As he cleaned his ingredient cutting equipment, he recalled his conversation with his master last week regarding getting assistance from Snape.

"No. Do not attempt to contact Snape. He is too close to the meddlesome old fool to involve him. We don't have time to examine every conversation that the auror has had with the school staff, so as much as possible try to avoid them. Remember that Dumbledore is a skilled Legilimens, so keep your Occlumency shields up when you are near him."

As he drifted off to sleep he thought to himself, 'If I could just learn how to operate that infernal eye.'

... --- ...

Wednesday 7 September

Amelia was delighted to see Hedwig fly through the open window into the kitchen. She missed having the kids at home and eagerly opened the notes that they had each sent.

Auntie,

The train ride was brill! Everyone in Hufflepuff came up and asked about Harry. Professor Moody will be covering the unforgiveable curses in class in the coming weeks and gave a demonstration on Friday. Was that how Mum and Dad were killed? Harry seemed especially quiet after Moody's class. I'll give him some time and space, but I'm sure that he was bothered by seeing it performed again.

The second level Runes class went well. Harry and I seem to be at about the same level as the rest of the class. Hermione was so nice

helping to catch us up over the summer. I'll get her a thank-you gift when we have the first Hogsmeade trip.

Miss you. Say hi to Smidgen.

Love,

Susan

Amelia smiled to herself as she read Susie's note. Every other sentence seemed to be about Harry. She picked up his note and opened it.

Dear Amelia,

It is nice having a parent to write to. I'm glad to get back to school, but the summer was the best one ever. Please say hi to Connie and Just Rufus for us when you see them. Susan and I are in quite a few of the same classes, but I miss sitting next to her when we eat our meals.

Please stay safe and let me know if anything comes up.

Love,

Harry

She smiled at his messy "boy handwriting" and at the sincerity of his letter. She said a silent prayer that they would both stay safe and attached her own notes back with Hedwig who waited patiently for her.

Just then, Connie's head appeared in the fireplace and called, "Amelia?"

She replied, "Right here, Connie. Come on through."

Connie replied, "Anna and I will be over in five minutes."

Amelia wasn't surprised by the call. Connie had made hundreds of after-hour visits over the years. Yet Amelia had sensed a note of urgency in her voice that usually wasn't present. She asked Smidgen to set out tea and biscuits when she heard the knock on the door. The little elf opened the door and the two investigators hurriedly walked in and began their tale.

An hour later Amelia replied, "So the short version is that a Horcrux is currently being held in Bellatrix's vault and if one of the Black family members walked into Gringotts with the key, you have an assurance from Longsnout that they will be allowed in to examine, but not remove any objects."

"In short, yes," replied Connie. He also mentioned that if a fire happened to destroy all of the contents of the vault, it would be highly unfortunate because there is no way to notify the registered vault tenants, as they are currently all residing in Azkaban."

Amelia asked, "Who would be eligible to enter the vault?"

Anna answered, "Bellatrix has a niece, Nymphadora Tonks and a nephew, Draco Malfoy. Either could enter if they had the key."

Understanding Connie's implication, Amelia inquired, "And where is the key?"

Connie answered, "It's currently in the personal property storage locker at Azkaban. If you sign this form, I'll go get it and you can give a quick call to Tonks. Fiendfyre would easily destroy everything in the vault and would certainly be easier to control than getting a dragon to destroy whatever is in there."

Amelia had a quizzical look on her face and commented, "We're asking her to destroy a vault full of property that in all likelihood, she's in line to inherit. What reason do we give her if we don't tell her that our real purpose is to destroy Riddle's Horcrux?"

Connie replied, "To keep the gold out of Riddle's grasp. We're best off not mentioning the horcrux."

Anna shook her head and commented, "Are you really asking her to potentially destroy a vault with a hundred thousand galleons or more in it that she's likely to partially inherit without even telling her why? That's her first twelve years earnings. That's going to require an incredible sales pitch on your part."

Amelia sighed and replied, "Connie, somehow I'll make it up to her to the extent that she has a claim on it. I don't know what else I can do. We can't force her to do it and we're not going to expand the number of people who are aware of the horcruxes."

Connie nodded and replied, "I agree."

Anna suggested, "I'll go get Tonks."

... --- ...

The next morning, Riddle felt a blinding pain that lasted for nearly a minute. Pettigrew noticed his master writhing on the chair and asked, "Master, what's wrong?"

For a minute, Riddle was unable to answer, then the pain subsided, and he felt lightheaded for a few minutes. After five minutes or so, the feeling slowly went away and the Dark Lord called, "Wormtail, I need to be fed. Be quick about it."

Something was wrong.

...--- ...

At the same time that the horcrux was being destroyed, Harry was working in Transfiguration when he felt a blinding pain and slumped to the floor. Hermione and Susan immediately went to his side and Hermione shouted, "Professor, Harry needs help!"

McGonagall was quick to react and called, "Mr. Weasley, go and advise Madam Pomfrey that Mr. Potter will be there momentarily." She immobilized Harry, and Susan and Hermione accompanied the Assistant Headmistress as she levitated Harry to the hospital wing.

Curiously enough, by the time she had levitated him onto a bed at the hospital wing, he seemed normal again and complained, "I'm fine."

Ignoring his comment, Poppy put up the privacy screen and examined him carefully while the two witches went back to the classroom under protest. Aside from the fact that his shirt was soaked, she begrudgingly agreed with him and released him to go to lunch.

... --- ...

Friday 9 September

Junior blew a calming breath as the fourth years walked out of his class. To his absolute amazement, Potter completely threw off his Imperius curse on just the second attempt! As he would have expected, none of the other students even came close to resisting the infamous curse. He wondered how in the world the skinny teen had thrown off his mind control curse as if it were nothing more than a pesky insect, when it had taken him a dozen years to escape his father's control.

Then to his complete annoyance, the stupid kid kept going on about his new dragonhide boots.

It would be a long year.

... --- ...

Later that evening, Crouch Senior woke up from being stunned all day only to be placed under the Imperius curse again. In the five seconds in between the two he resolved to find a way to contact Dumbledore when he had the opportunity.

In the meantime, he continued to stare at the wall as he had been commanded.

... --- ...

Amelia was examining the photos that Anna had taken when she accompanied third year Auror Cadet Tonks to the Black-LeStrange

vault the day before. The detection charm that Longsnout had cast had indicated that the object in question had been a small golden cup, not much larger than a jigger. Of nearly equal interest were the other cursed objects and financial instruments, deeds and the like that Anna had photographed.

The whole idea of soul splitting sickened her to think of, but as Connie had explained it the spell cast to actually split a soul and embed the other half into an object would literally split the castor's soul in half.

Amelia inquired, "Did the manuscript that you referenced indicate how many times someone could split their soul and have it work?"

Connie replied, "Other than the spell itself, it really only referenced five points. First, it took an intentional murder to initiate the process with the horcrux creation immediately following. Second, it was a literal split into two equal pieces. Third, multiple splits were theoretically possible. Fourth if the horcrux were destroyed the wizard would somehow be weakened magically, but there were no specifics. Finally, while sufficiently anchored, the witch or wizard who had created a horcrux couldn't be killed. I'll read it again and see if there was anything that I missed."

As she spoke, Amelia took notes and wrote several ideas down, so as to not interrupt her friend. When Connie had finished, Amelia removed her monocle and remarked, "What it didn't reference was how to destroy the horcruxes, what could be a horcrux, the idea of being killed vs. death by other causes and how large of a piece was needed to serve as an anchor or to survive."

Scrimgeour asked, "Where in the world would he have read how to do it? There can't have been many copies of the book made."

Connie replied, "It wasn't even a book. It was a handwritten manuscript from the Marr collection. I doubt that there were more than a small handful of copies created. Otherwise there would have been hundreds of instances of dark wizards or witches making them over the years."

Amelia remarked, "Dippet. Before Dumbledore became headmaster in '46, Dippet occasionally allowed students into the headmaster's reserved section. Riddle probably came across the information while he was in school. I think it makes sense to go and talk with Dumbledore about this and see what he knows."

Anna asked, "What else do we know about the other one that he made?"

Amelia reflected and replied, "It was a diary embedded with thought the essence of Riddle as a sixteen year old student. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that if he made multiple horcruxes that it was probably the first one he made. Anna, let me see the photo that you took from the vault again, please."

Anna handed her the photo and she took a magnifying glass out of her drawer to examine the photo. There was an intricate engraving on the cup of a badger. She handed the glass back to Anna and asked, "What do you see?"

The young investigator looked at it for a moment and asked, "Is that an otter?"

Amelia smiled and replied, "Think Hogwarts founder. It was a badger. I believe that was Helga Hufflepuff's cup."

Connie remarked, "Where in the world would Riddle or Lestrangle have gotten hold of that? It must have been a priceless artifact before he corrupted it."

Amelia replied, "I'll set something up with Dumbledore next month. In the meantime, I'd like you each to consider what the similarities and differences are between these two items. We'll talk again in a fortnight."

Scrimgeour remarked, "Maybe the three of you should go. I've said no to too many of his little suggestions over the years to have him interested in having tea with me."



Amelia was about to chide him about acquiescing to Fudge's request about stationing a full team in Diagon Alley, but decided that pouring salt in an obviously open wound wouldn't accomplish anything.

... --- ...

Tuesday 20 September

Hermione found Susan and Harry in the library working on their Runes paper. She walked up behind Susan, gave her shoulder a squeeze and said, "Thank you two for arranging the birthday party last night. It was kind of you to remember and even nicer to see some people from the other houses too."

Susan smiled back and replied, "You're welcome, Hermione. I'm glad that we've gotten to know each other and become such good friends these last months."

Old habits dieing hard, the bushy hair witch glanced at Harry's parchment and commented, "Harry, your Feoh rune should describe wealth, not power. Also make the down stroke just a bit longer. Susan, yours looks good."

She smiled at the other witch, while Harry got his quill out.

Hermione winked at her and added, "Keep working on him. He's a keeper."

Susan beamed at her and replied, "Thanks."

... --- ...

Sunday 30 October

Junior cursed at himself as he removed that cursed leg and the eye. He downed three fingers of scotch after the Polyjuice potion had worn off. The first batch of potion that he had made had been completed, bottled and stowed away in Moody's trunk. He had been able to purchase additional powdered bicorn horn, though the price had been higher than when he had purchased it in August.

Junior had carefully placed the charms that his master had recommended on the Goblet of Fire the night before. When the castle quieted down after those brats went to bed, he would suit up as Moody and place Potter's name into the goblet. If everything worked as they had planned, Potter's name would come out of the Goblet as the chosen champion of the unnamed fourth school. Unfortunately, there was no way to test and see if the charms would work as planned.

If Potter's name came out, he would need to be next to his father to tell him what to say in order to ensure that Potter was accepted by the other officials as the fourth champion and that the contest go forth as originally scheduled.

If not, his orders were to snatch the boy at the first opportunity and portkey him to his master's estate. He couldn't do it while Potter was in the castle, but might have a chance if he could be found at one of the Hogsmeade visits.

Junior downed three ounces of the disgusting potion, strapped on that horrible leg and eye before picking up the slip of paper with Harry Potter written on it and walking out.

The next day would be interesting.

... --- ...

Tuesday 1 November

Amelia was awakened by little Smidgen who said, "Miss Suzzie's Harry friend's owl has a message for you, Mistress."

Auntie,

Something terrible happened at the Goblet of Fire ceremony! First it picked Victor Krum from Durmstrang. Then it picked Fleur Delecour from Beauxbatons. Then it picked Cedric. Then a minute later, Harry's name came out!

This is awful! Everyone says that the tournament is dangerous and that some of the previous champions have been killed!

Harry told them that he had nothing to do with putting his name in the goblet, he didn't want to compete, and that he had no intention of being in the contest. Mr. Crouch said that he had to - something about a magical contract.

Auntie, please help him. I don't want anything else to happen to him!

Love,

Susan

Amelia thought about what she knew about Harry Potter, the things he'd told her, what she'd seen herself, and the words that he'd used when he'd spoken them. He was undoubtedly the most fearless, noble young man that she'd ever met, but... And there was a huge point there; he didn't go looking for trouble. He would not have signed up for the tournament without discussing it with her.

The fact of the matter was that Harry was too young to sign a magical contract. There was no way in the world that the Dursleys would have signed anything on his behalf. She got dressed, ate a quick breakfast and hurried into the office.

When she got to Crouch's office, Percy Weasley, the new-hire aide was sitting at the desk outside the office. He inquired, "How may I help you, Director Bones?"

She smiled and replied, "Good morning Percy. You can arrange a meeting with Ludo Bagman and Barty in my office in fifteen minutes."

Percy looked uneasy and replied, "I'm sorry Director, Mr. Crouch will be unavailable all day. Actually, he may be unavailable for the rest of the week. Is there some way that I could assist you?"

The smile had left Amelia's face. In a much more directive voice she stated, "Yes Percy, you can. Go find him, and have him in my office in fourteen minutes."

"I'm sorry, Director Bones. Mr Crou..."

"Percy, do I look like the sort of person who would be intimidated by an aide who has been at the Ministry for a month?"

"Nine and a half weeks, actually. I'm Mr. Crouch's personal assistant. I'm certain that I could help in..."

With every bit of patience she could muster she inquired, "Percy, would you enjoy being reassigned to Azkaban for a few weeks, scrubbing out cells of prisoners who have died?"

Without a trace of his usual pompous tone, Percy replied, "No, Director Bones."

Seeing some evidence of agreement from the teen, she softened her stance a bit and observed, "No, you certainly wouldn't. Please have them both in my office in twenty minutes, and come along yourself, since you are Barty's new personal assistant."

... --- ...

"No, Weatherby, I'm supposed to stay here," droned the old man as he went back to staring at the blank wall.

In something of a panic, Percy protested, "But sir, Director Bones was most insistent." He really didn't wish to spend a month working in Azkaban scrubbing cells.

Crouch's monotone reply was, "Weatherby, I've worked at the Ministry for nearly forty years. You have worked for me for just over forty days. I'm not feeling well and I'm taking some time off right now. If there's something urgent that I need to see or sign, please bring it to me each afternoon at four. You can handle the daily work until I return. Can you do that, or would you prefer to be reassigned?"

Resigned to his fate with a scrub brush, the redhead replied, "No sir. Thank you for the confidence that you've shown me. I'll take care of everything. Specifically, what should I tell Director Bones?"

“Tell her that the ancient rules specifically state that once a champion has been entered and selected that they are honor bound to compete. It is assumed that the champion candidate either entered themselves, or had an authorized person enter for them. I view it as a magical contract, with at least a chance that an unwilling witch or wizard, once selected, would be magically penalized. We can review the process on a go-forward basis, but for now, it is what it is. Have I explained myself clearly, Weatherby?”

Encouraged by his manager’s words, Percy gave a smart reply. “Yes sir. Perfectly clear sir. I shall relay your message exactly as you gave it, sir. With your permission, I’ll take my leave now.”

“Fine, Weatherby. Fill out the necessary paperwork for a promotional pay raise to level A-3 and I’ll sign it the next time you come by. Is there anything else?”

“No sir.” With that, Percy Weasley, AKA Weatherby, carefully closed his manager’s back door and returned to the Ministry to relay Senior’s messages and positions to a very unhappy witch.

... --- ...

As Amelia was reading the letter from Susan, Ron was getting out of bed. He was hurt that Harry had lied to him regarding placing his name in the goblet. He had probably used his invisibility cloak to get across Dumbledore’s line somehow. The passage of an evening had not diminished Ron’s anger at Harry. If anything, it had only intensified. As he walked down the steps, he saw him sitting there, as bold as brass, chatting up Hermione.

... --- ...

Fred gave George a significant look as they spotted their younger brother standing on the stairway, giving Harry a death glare. Each took a galleon out and they set them on the table between their chairs in some unspoken wager that only the two of them could comprehend. From across the common room, they could hear Ron’s voice getting louder and angrier. Several students sat on their respective stairways

to gawk and stay out of the way of what was certain to become an ugly scene.

George took out another galleon as Ron's voice got louder and whispered, "Double or nothing – Ron takes a swing at Harry before either of them makes it out the door."

Fred nodded, took two galleons out of his pocket and replied, "Agreed. Another galleon says Ronnikins ends up on the floor, bleeding."

McLaggen commented, "Your brother's bigger than Potter and stronger too. I'll take that bet." He took out ten galleons and set it on the table.

Fred and George immediately took out five galleons each and replied, "You're on." George thought to himself, 'Never bet against Potter.'

Oblivious of the wagering action taking place around them, Ron shouted, "Fine. Be that way. I hope you get your arse handed to you in the first task." He shoved Harry, who shoved him back. Ron reacted poorly and attempted a roundhouse swing at Harry, who was far too quick to be hit by such a slow punch. He got out of the way and gave Ron a big shove into one of the chairs where he landed arse over teakettle with a thunk on the stone floor, bloodying his nose. He looked up and shouted, "Drop dead, Potter."

McLaggen handed his galleons over to the smirking twins. Even in the face of a train wreck, there was gold to be made.

Ron picked himself up and stormed out of the door, flipping Harry the finger as he left.

Hermione shook her head and apologized to Harry, saying, "Charming."

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Wednesday 2 November

Classes had just started for the morning when Dumbledore answered the knock on his door. "Enter."

Quickly sizing up the emotionally charged woman, he greeted her. "Ah, Amelia. To what do I owe the pleasure this morning?"

"Pleasure? It's anything but. What in Merlin's name is going on with this contest of yours, Dumbledore? Susie wrote me and said that you had drawn an age line. How in God's name did Harry's name get entered, and why didn't you immediately declare the contest a draw and call for a recasting of the names?"

The old wizard steepled his fingers together as he looked at her and replied, "Indeed, I did cast an age line, Amelia. As such, I believe that it is highly improbable that young Harry entered his name into the Goblet. Further, I have my doubts that any of his classmates, at least those that call themselves his friend, had entered his name into the Goblet."

Amelia shook her head and stated, "I will not allow this to happen to Harry, least of all against his will."

"I quite agree, but it remains that someone has gone to considerable length to enter him into the contest. As Alastor observed, it would take a powerful wizard to bamboozle such a powerful magical object into believing that there was a fourth school."

Amelia was shocked at his statement. It hadn't even occurred to her how the perpetrator had done the crime. Yet at Dumbledore's words, Moody's idea made perfect sense. Was he suggesting that he somehow approved of Harry's participation in the contest?

"Certainly you're not suggesting..."

Dumbledore looked over his half moon specs and replied, "Actually, I am Amelia. I believe that we should allow this mystery to unfold a bit more and see what happens."

"See what happens! Harry's not some pawn for you to move on your human chessboard in an exploratory move, Dumbledore. It's not for

you to decide that he should participate in this obvious trap just to see who you can flush out.” She could barely contain her frustration at the arrogance of the man.

As calm as ever, the old wizard stated, “Frank Bryce makes me think differently, Amelia.”

Enraged, Bones demanded, “What do you know about Frank Bryce, Dumbledore?”

As calmly as he could, Dumbledore replied, “I too, read the papers. He met his death in Little Hangleton in August. He had been the long time groundskeeper at the Riddle estate.”

Amelia knew as much, as she had seen Harry’s memory of the event, but she chose not to say so. She asked, “What’s your point, Headmaster?”

“Since you are aware of the Prophecy, perhaps it is time to test young Harry’s mettle.”

The badger in her was ready to bite his withered arse. “Test his mettle? I’ve a good mind to pull him out of this school of yours and...”

“Actually, I think that’s a fine idea, at least for the rest of the week. He’s already had quite a falling out with young Mr. Weasley over his declaration that he didn’t enter himself into the contest. Having him away from the school for a few days might save him a few friendships, and heaven knows, he’ll need all of the support that he can muster this year.”

Blowing out a breath that she had been holding, she shook her head and replied, “Fine. I’ll go pick him up now. When you come to my house for breakfast Saturday, you’ll tell me exactly what you have learned about horcruxes.” Dumbledore made a conscious effort to keep his mouth from dropping open as the Director of Magical Law Enforcement walked out of his office and allowed the door to close a bit louder than normal. She was not a happy witch.

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By prior agreement, Anna had been tapped to question Harry that afternoon, after Amelia brought Harry home after taking him out for a quick lunch. Not that there was much precedent in this particular situation, but Connie excused herself on the basis of being too close to the family. Harry had agreed to take the veritaserum, and Connie carefully counted out and administered three drops of the powerful truth serum.

Anna waited a minute for it to take full effect and began her script of questions. "What is your name?"

In the expected flat voice, the messy haired teen replied, "Harry James Potter."

"Did you place your name into the Goblet of Fire?"

"No."

"Did you ask anyone to place your name into the Goblet?"

"No."

"Did anyone that you know place your name into the Goblet?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you want to enter the tournament?"

"No."

"This concludes the deposition." Anna was tempted to ask him how things were going with Susan, but she didn't want to violate his trust.

Connie administered the antidote and they waited a minute for it to take effect. Taken at face value, Harry's name coming out of the Goblet wasn't too big of a stretch to imagine. One of his pals could have easily tossed or banished his name across the age line without his knowledge. What was disturbing was the idea that Amos's boy had already been selected as the Hogwarts champion. No student

would have had access to the Goblet long enough to have enchanted it into thinking that there were four schools. She asked, "Harry, who has it in for you at Hogwarts?"

He thought about her question for a few minutes and replied, "I can only think of two people, Draco Malfoy and Snape."

Connie waited a moment and suggested, "Keep going."

Harry added, "Malfoy's dad gave the diary to Ginny Weasley two years ago and got booted off of the Hogwarts board of directors because of it. He was probably pretty hacked off over that and I wouldn't put it past him to have talked Draco into doing something about it."

Connie considered his words and nodded. Launching another plot where he would only have to indirectly participate and could sit back and watch the bedlam from a distance didn't seem to be too out of character for the slippery wizard. She waited, and finally Harry continued.

"Snape has always had it in for me and from what my dad's friends told me, it is a continuation of some teenage grudge that he and my dad had when they were in school."

Connie might have dismissed his words, except everything that she knew and had observed about the teen suggested that he did not lie or exaggerate about important things. If anything, he understated most things. So she found herself with two leads that would be difficult to follow-up.

Harry asked, "Is there anything else?"

Connie and Anna looked at each other for a moment and Anna replied, "Not right now, Harry. You have been very candid with us this afternoon. Thank you very much."

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While Harry was being deposed by Anna, Susan was on the short end of some very hurtful comments, courtesy of Draco Malfoy. "Hey Bonesie, "I heard that the aurors came in and dragged your little boyfriend off. He's probably on his way to Azkaban by now." As if on cue, Crabbe and Goyle leered at the teen, making her very uncomfortable.

Fortunately Cedric Diggory had seen the exchange and called, "Knock it off, twerp. Shove off, you two. Come on, Susan. It's almost time for dinner. These two poster boys for contraceptive spells can go amuse themselves someplace else."

She walked along with her older housemate and gave him a grateful look. After they had gone a ways, she replied, "Thanks, Cedric. It's been a pretty crappy afternoon. I didn't think so many people would come up and say such crude things about Harry."

"Only the idiots would," observed Diggory. Potter told Dumbledore that he had nothing to do with putting his name into the goblet, and I believe him. He's a good guy."

"Thanks," replied Susan. "He didn't, I'm sure of it. He told me that he was looking forward to a quiet year at school with the focus on someone else for a change."

"It will work out," replied, Cedric, encouragingly. "If anyone gives you two an especially hard time, let me know. Okay?"

"All right," agreed Susan. Thanks Cedric."

He grinned and replied, "No worries."

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Saturday 5 November

Saturday morning, Amelia got up early. She wasn't surprised to see Harry sitting at the table having a cup of tea and pushing a raisin with his spoon. Rufus had volunteered to take Thursday and Friday off and had taken Harry out to the Auror training center to work out

his frustrations. Both evenings he had come home exhausted, but hopefully had learned something useful, in addition to simply blasting away bits of ballistic clay. She smiled at him and said, "Good morning, Harry. Are you rescuing raisons this morning?"

"No," answered Harry, not really listening. "I miss Susan." In reality, he hadn't been away from the strawberry blonde for this long since he moved into the house in the summer.

"I'm certain that she'll be delighted to hear that," replied Amelia, suppressing a smile at his absent-minded honesty. "Professor Dumbledore, Rufus, Connie and Anna should be here in a little while. I want to see what Dumbledore will offer up before we show him our cards. He may have some insight regarding those blasted horcruxes and hopefully he has some idea how many of those wretched things that monster might have created. Additionally, I intend to place some additional security in the school.

Harry looked at her, but didn't say anything. It felt like she had more to say, so he waited.

Realizing what he was doing, she smiled at him and added, "Very good, Harry." She continued, "Harry, Professor Dumbledore believes that it would be best if you agreed to participate in the tournament.

As she expected, she didn't have to wait long for his reaction. "He can go bugger himself. I don't want anything to do with that thing."

Unsurprised by his less than genteel remark, she replied, "Susie said about the same thing when I met her in the hallway at Hogwarts before I came and collected you."

He looked at her and she continued, "Irrespective of what Barty Crouch sees as the rule, it is completely your choice. As headmaster of the hosting school, Dumbledore can declare the contest to be complete and hold another drawing the next morning."

"Why does he want me to participate?" asked Harry, not at all convinced that it would be in his best interest.

“Why indeed?” exclaimed the old professor as he brushed himself off upon leaving the fireplace. “Good morning, Amelia, Harry. I believe that it would be in your best interest to participate in order to improve your skills and also to flush out the person or persons responsible for entering you in the tournament.”

“We can discuss Harry’s options and let him make an informed decision after the others have left,” replied Amelia, who had no intention of allowing anyone to force their views onto Harry.

Dumbledore commented, “I wasn’t aware that anyone else would be here this morning. Ah, good morning Miss Daily, Madam Hammer and Mr. Scrimgeour. How nice to see you all again.”

Before the old professor could shift the conversation onto a subject of his choosing, Amelia interjected, “The subject of the day is Horcruxes - specifically as they relate to Tom Riddle. Professor Dumbledore has agreed to come here this morning to tell us what he knows about them and what he believes as well. Professor?”

Dumbledore noted the unsurprised looks on the faces of the two investigators and the Senior Auror. Obviously they had previously discussed at least the concept of the soul anchors. He began, “A horcrux is a vessel that is used to store a fragment of someone’s soul for the purpose of anchoring him or her onto this plane of existence in the event that they are killed.”

Amelia was going to cut the old professor off and urge him to get past the basics, but held back at the last second. If nothing else, it would help give everyone a common understanding of what they were up against.

As he continued, Anna made some notes in her notebook and listed some questions that she would ask after the old professor was through. In truth, she was expecting more information, beyond the overview level.

When Dumbledore stopped, she looked at her notes and asked, “Professor, in your opinion, did Riddle start murdering people who he felt had wronged him somehow, and came up with the idea of

creating horcruxes later on, or do you think that creating them had been his original purpose?"

The old professor considered her question for a moment and replied, "Miss Daily, it is my belief that he discussed the means of creating a horcrux during his fifth year, made his plans and executed them the summer before his sixth year when his father and grandparents were doubtless murdered by his own hand." He paused for a moment and questioned, "Miss Daily, you used horcruxes in the plural. Is it your belief that he created more than one?"

She replied, "Yes. Who would Riddle have talked to regarding them when he was still at Hogwarts. The literature about them is quite scarce. Honestly, I'm amazed that Connie had even heard of them. Since Riddle, at age fifteen would have lacked the resources beyond what had been made available to him by Headmaster Dippet or some other professor, who do you believe was his source?"

'Well done, Miss Daily. It took me almost ten years to reach the same conclusions that the four of...' Seeing Harry, he corrected himself, "The five of you reached in a few months. I'm all but certain that Horace Slughorn was approached by Tom in the spring of his fifth year and asked about his opinion on that very matter. Unfortunately, I do not know what Horace advised him."

Anna saw Amelia writing in her notebook and guessed the topic. She asked, "Professor, how many horcruxes do you speculate that Riddle might have created?"

Impressed by her tenacity, Dumbledore replied, "I base my opinion, not with a predetermined quantity in mind, as Horace has refused to speak of his conversation; rather I have based it upon the items themselves. Clearly there was the diary of his sixteen-year-old self. He must have created that with the idea of not only providing an anchor of his own soul, but also to have the ability of using it to steal someone else's life force and re-animating himself at some point in the future."

He continued, "He may have created that first, with the murder of poor Myrtle Wagner, who was killed by Slytherin's basilisk that you, Harry so ably dispatched."

He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts and continued, "The second item I believe to have become a horcrux was a ring that his mother's father wore. Tom was wearing it beginning with his sixth year. It was said to have been owned by Salazar himself – One of two artifacts previously connected to him."

Anna asked, "And the other?"

"A locket that Tom's mother owned. I believe that she sold it to Borgin and Burkes to have some money to feed herself and her unborn baby with for the month before Tom was born."

"So you believe that he tended to use founders' artifacts for his horcruxes?"

"The evidence points to it," replied Dumbledore. "Hepzibah Smith was said to have purchased the locket and a small cup belonging to Helga Hufflepuff from Burke in 1927 or 28. Tom finished in 1945. I, among others, expected that he would apply for, and advance in, what could have been a spectacular career at the Ministry. Instead, he began his quest for power through intimidation, torture and murder."

Anna recapped, saying, "So you know or believe that he made horcruxes out of the diary, Slytherin's locket, his ring and Hufflepuff's cup. Any ideas about others?"

Dumbledore thought for a minute and replied, "It is logical that he may have created them out of opportunity – That said, if he discovered a founder's artifact, he would steal it and pervert it to his purposes. Unfortunately, that is an open-ended equation, leaving us with no clue as to what his final plans were. We can only assume that he hasn't made any additional horcruxes since Harry defeated him in 1981. Indeed, he may have consumed one to get to his current state."

Anna saw Amelia write something down, but didn't want to interrupt the headmaster's train of thought.

Dumbledore adjusted his half moon spectacles and continued. "My other thought is that he created the first one, most likely the diary, and came across the idea of creating additional horcruxes later on. I believe this to be the more likely scenario and believe that he was somehow given guidance regarding a number to use as a goal. As I mentioned, I have been unable to persuade Horace to reveal the details of any conversations that the two of them had. The two numbers that make sense magically, would be two plus one – that being two horcruxes plus his own piece, or six plus one."

Connie interjected, "Given that we already have the diary, you believe that he used a ring and a locket and identified Hufflepuff's cup for another, we seem to be past the two plus one theory."

Anna tried to get back on track before the deposition turned into a chat over tea. She asked, "Professor, do you have any thought regarding where Riddle may have hidden his horcruxes?"

Dumbledore replied, "He apparently gave Lucius his diary for safekeeping and will likely be very angry when he discovers that it was used and destroyed to no better purpose than a futile attempt to discredit Arthur Weasley."

Anna waited for a moment, and he added, "I find it very unlikely that Lucius knew what it was that he was keeping. First, it would have been completely out of character for Tom to disclose so big of a secret to any of his followers. Second, if Lucius had known that Tom's soul was anchored to this plane of existence, he and the remaining followers would have never abandoned their search for their master. As to where he hid the others, I can only speculate that he either hid them in places that held meaning to him, or with his most trusted servants, or both."

Anna glanced at Amelia, who nodded and spoke up. "Thank you, Professor. You have been remarkably candid this morning. In the spirit of co-operation, allow us to be equally candid. Connie and Anna discovered Hufflepuff's cup in Belatrix's Gringotts vault."



"We must obtain it as quickly as possible," countered Dumbledore, who was obviously shocked and delighted at the discovery.

"That's not possible," Professor, replied Anna, attempting to look innocent. "The entire contents of her vault were destroyed in an accidental fire in early September."

Not certain what to say, Dumbledore asked, "And you are quite certain that it was indeed Hufflepuff's cup and that it contained a fragment of Tom's soul?"

Connie replied, "We're as certain as we can be without expanding the list of people who know how he survived in 1981."

Dumbledore nodded. He knew that it became exponentially more difficult to keep a secret as additional people became aware of it. He asked, "Madam Hammer, you appear to be remarkably informed regarding Horcruxes. My own list of resources on the subject is embarrassingly thin. If I may ask, how did you come across your information?"

Amelia cut in and replied, "Professor, whereas you have unlimited access to the public, restricted and the headmaster's private collections at Hogwarts, Connie, Rufus, myself and the two heads of the Unspeakables have unfettered access to the combined DMLE/Unspeakable library. Whereas Dippet probably gave young Tom Riddle access to the headmaster's collection that he had no business doing, the so called Marr collection is available on an eyes-only basis, meaning that the authority to view the said documents cannot be re-delegated to others."

Dumbledore nodded sadly. Armando should have never provided such dangerous information to Tom. There were only a few volumes that even referenced horcruxes in the restricted section. It didn't make sense that Dippet would have been so free with a fifth year. No school head would...

Clarity hit Dumbledore like a lightning bolt. He called, "Harry, when you return to the castle on Sunday, perhaps you would be willing to lead us on one additional tour of Salazar's Chamber of Secrets."

Connie didn't want Harry going anywhere near that awful place, and doubted that Amelia did either. She wanted to stay on track for a few minutes more and feared that Dumbledore was attempting to call the meeting to a close. She added, "Professor, the Marr collection had three other points of interest regarding multiple horcruxes that we should discuss."

Seeing that she had his undivided attention, she continued, "First is the idea of even fractures, meaning that the first horcrux created would have contained an even half of Riddle's soul. It makes sense that it was the diary, as it contained enough of his essence, both magical and spiritual that re-animation might have been possible."

Seeing him nod, she added, "That said, the ring, locket or the cup, whichever was made next would have contained a fourth, eighth and a sixteenth of his soul respectively. Thus if he made two or three others, they would have contained smaller and smaller fractions respectively."

Dumbledore nodded considering her words. Logically it wouldn't be possible to specify in advance that he wanted to chip off a seventh at a time like some sort of stonecutter.

Hammer continued, "Last, but not least, was the anchoring concept. It stated that if a wizard was killed after having lost ninety-percent of his anchor, he would die just like anyone else. As such, there was no practical benefit of creating a fifth, sixth or seventh horcrux, since they wouldn't provide a sufficient anchor if the first ones were already destroyed. That said, Slughorn might have suggested to Riddle that creating six or a dozen horcruxes would be the best number, but he would have been wrong and they weren't all created equally. He may have only lost two of six so far, but we aren't talking about seven equal slices of a cherry pie, and two of the four critical pieces have been destroyed. Professor, if Riddle was your equal before 1981 and you are ten times the typical wizard in terms of either raw power, or stamina, he's been cut in half and probably more in the last few years."

Scrimgeour added, "So the critical task would be to find his ring and the locket, or whatever was the fourth horcrux before he regains his body."

Connie nodded and replied, "In so many words, that's right."

Anna conjured a long strip of paper, some ten feet long by two wide. "This represents Riddle's soul and magical stamina in 1980 when he began looking for the Potters." She folded the sheet in half and carefully tore it along the edge. She tossed one of the halves into the fire, saying, "This represents Riddle's soul and magical stamina after Harry destroyed the first horcrux. Granted, a lot of it is gone, but even so, Harry would have a hard time filling this paper up for one of Snape's homework assignments."

Dumbledore was about to admonish her lack of respect for Severus, but Amelia gave him a withering look that McGonagall would have been proud of, and he remained quiet.

"If the ring was the second one created, it would look like this." She folded the paper lengthwise, cut it, and tossed one of the halves into the fire. Harry noted that it was now about the size of one of his friend Hermione's essays.

"If the locket was the third one created, it would have stored a piece about this size." She tore the paper in half, leaving a two and a half foot length, about the size of one of his essays. It looked pretty manageable.

"If the cup was the fourth one created, it would only be this large." She held up a sheet, hardly longer than one of Ron's essays.

She concluded, saying, "It really doesn't matter how many others there are. If the first four can be found and destroyed, there isn't enough of his soul remaining to anchor him if he is killed, and he couldn't come back."

Rufus commented, "Regarding stamina, if he could duel nonstop for hours before, even if he succeeds in getting a body back, he still might only be good for a small handful of serious spells before he

wears himself out. Most of our aurors can go ten minutes straight before passing out. The point is, the so called prophecy might already have been fulfilled when Harry stuck that broken basilisk fang through the diary.”

Dumbledore had a fleeting thought that most generals do not directly engage in battle, but thought better than to bring down the upbeat mood so early in what was likely to be a very long battle. He replied, “Well spoken, both of you. That brings us back to the tournament. Harry, despite Amelia’s very valid objections, I believe that the best way to unravel the plot behind entering you in the tournament is for you to play it out. In the meanwhile, Anna, Connie, Amelia, Rufus and I have the responsibility to find and destroy the remaining horcruxes.”

Amelia considered his words for a moment and gave Scrimgeour a meaningful look, worthy of Fred or George.

He nodded, and she replied, “If Harry agrees of his own free will, I will allow his participation in your event under two conditions. I intend to level the playing field and keep my son safe. First, Auror Cadet Tonks will be allowed to infiltrate into the school and Rufus is allowed to train Harry on weekends.”

Dumbledore thought about her words and stated, “According to the tournament rules, no professor of the champion’s school, or the champion’s parent or guardian, or any tournament official is allowed to give direction or assistance to any of the champions. That would exclude myself, any Hogwarts teacher, Barty, Percy in his stead, or Ludo from providing direct assistance. If Miss Tonks were to take a temporary position as Poppy’s assistant, she would be eligible to assist Harry as needed.”

Amelia waited for the slippery old headmaster to finish before she said anything. In this case, she wanted everything her way, or not at all.

He continued, “Regarding coaching from Rufus, I think that would be a splendid idea. Naturally, I will run it by the staff and Barty so there are no claims of wrongdoing.”

“No!” commanded Amelia. “The knowledge of the help does not leave this room. I don’t give a rat’s arse who wins your bloody event. I want Harry alive, whole and healthy at the end of the year. Agreed?”

Dumbledore nodded, still intending to tell a critical few.

Amelia shook her head and replied, “Your word, Professor, your vow that no one outside this room will learn of any assistance given to Harry. Take it, or leave it.”

Dumbledore sighed and replied, “I agree to your terms, Director.”

Amelia gave Harry a soul-searching look and admitted, “Harry, it’s up to you. I would be happier if you just said no, but I respect you enough to give you the final say.”

Susan will have my hide, thought Harry as he replied, “I’ll do it.”

“I’ll train him Saturdays from eight until three,” suggested Scrimgeour.

Harry gave Amelia a pleading look and she countered, “Seven until eleven. I’ll make him a set of timed portkeys – One for each Saturday that he can take from the Hogwarts gates to the apparition point outside the training facility. Harry, no one must know of this. Can you keep it a secret?”

Harry replied, “I’d prefer to tell Susan, so she doesn’t get mad at me, and I’ll be okay. She nodded. Looking at Rufus, Harry replied, “Thank you, Senior Auror Scrimgeour. I’ll do my best to learn your lessons and not mess up too badly.”

“And what will Miss Tonks’ role be?” asked Dumbledore.

Amelia replied, “For now, simply another pair of eyes to keep watch for strange occurrences and a pair of hands to react in case anything comes up. Since she has no real duties to perform, she may end up learning a fair amount of useful healing skills, and in that position, she would be free to quietly leave the castle on a short-term basis without raising suspicion. She can simply pose as a healer-trainee looking for

some practical experience and not raise any suspicion. She can disguise herself enough so that none of your staff recognizes her. She could be on an exchange from Australia to get out of the issue of none of the staff recognizing her name as a former student. She'll do fine. Do we need another oath, Professor?"

The old headmaster realized that he had received as good of a bargain as he was going to get and replied, "Agreed." He took a look at his twelve moon watch and added, "I must be going. Harry, if you and the others could be outside Myrtle's bathroom at 8AM tomorrow, we can conclude our search. Until then, I will take my leave." With that he tossed a bit of floo powder into the fireplace and went to his next destination.

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As the old scribe walked into McGonagall's office, she was ready to admonish him for being late. It had been over a month since he had delivered his last report. She had no sense of humor regarding the unkind remark that he'd made in his report. As the words were forming on her lips, she gave a startled scream. Crow had tossed a dead rattlesnake on her desk!!!

"Where did you get that hideous creature?" she demanded.

Crow recalled a trip to some bad lands that he and his steel horse had recently made, but said nothing. Instead he placed a parchment on her desk, along with a note that read 30 minutes – 5178251 – Very interesting.

After the old scribe walked off, the thin professor attempted to banish the hideous creature from her desk, but couldn't, as one of the fangs was embedded into the wood. Not wanting anything to do with the deadly creature, she vowed to herself that Crow would receive a month of detentions the next time that she saw him and summoned Mr. Filch to remove the serpent from her office.

Per previous agreement, she got out her marking quill and loaded it with red ink to review his report.

... -- ...

Thanks, Steve.

## Chapter Ten

### Quaffles and Kisses

Sunday 6 November

Sunday morning, Amelia got up early for the day, as was becoming her custom when any of the teens were home. About an hour before the others were scheduled to arrive, Harry came down to the kitchen. He looked at her for a moment and said, "I just wanted to thank you for standing up for me the last few days. It feels nice, knowing that you're looking out for me."

Delighted at his words, she smiled back and replied, "Harry, that's what parents do for their kids. I'm honored to do it for you, and am certain that you'll do the same for your own kids someday."

For just a moment, Harry allowed himself the luxury of a forward-looking mental view of his own personal Mirror of Erised. It felt good.

Amelia noticed the dreamy look on his face and commented, "So far, we've been so focused on the tournament and those God-awful horcruxes. What else is on your mind?"

Harry admitted, "I did have a few questions..."

Amelia suggested, "Fire away."

"Whatever came of those Death Eaters from the World Cup?"

Trying to understand his real question, she replied, "Nothing yet. St. Mungo's never reported anyone coming in for a foot or leg replacement. I don't believe that either of them died, so the most likely case is that their buddies sent them to either a muggle hospital or to a healer out of the country."

He didn't say anything for a few seconds and she asked, "Did I answer your question?"



Harry nodded and replied, "Yes, thanks. Who told Rufus to station all of the extra Aurors away from the World Cup?"

She replied, "Fudge suggested it to Rufus and Lucius Malfoy suggested it to Fudge. Naturally when one of the Aurors ran into Malfoy at a social setting a week later, Lucius insisted that Fudge had had too much to drink and had simply misinterpreted his suggestion, which he claims was simply to have extra Aurors on duty."

Harry was visibly disappointed. It seemed that nothing was resolved on either incident. She saw his look and observed, "Harry, it happens."

He looked at her and she commented, "There's little doubt in my mind that Malfoy made the suggestion to Fudge. They were in a public place and there was an expensive bottle of scotch visible on the table. They both had plausible deniability on that issue. Nor is there any doubt in my mind regarding Malfoy wanting the Aurors away from the campground - Either because he was participating in the Death Eater march, or that he knew it was going to happen and he decided to lend a hand by clearing the way. Until we find two men missing a foot and shoe, we don't have enough to bring anyone to trial. Remember this – We can bring someone in to trial at a later date, but we can't go back and try them for the same crime twice. Sometimes, its better to wait."

Satisfied, but not pleased, Harry asked, "So what's next?"

"Rufus will be your contact. He will provide you training in general and a strategy to use for each of the tasks. You will need to plan on working as hard as you can with him. I don't care if you win any event, Harry. I just want you to get through them and hope that whoever set you up for this will be caught. I want you to keep your eyes open at school. Tonks will be your only other contact. Moody is a professor this year, and is outside of the rules in terms of giving you any help, so don't mention anything to him. Aside from Susie, Hermione and Tonks, don't discuss the tournament or any of the other details with anyone else in the castle – Not the professors, not your classmates, no one."

"Okay. I promise."

Trying to lighten the mood a bit, she mentioned, "There are some upsides, Harry. You'll automatically receive an 'O' on all of your exams, and there's a very nice surprise around Christmas. Since there are no quidditch matches or practices this year, you should have plenty of time to keep up with your homework and still see your friends. Also, there are Hogsmeade visits every other weekend."

He smiled and she continued, "Back to the serious side for a moment, we have to plan for the worst, in this case, by assuming that Riddle is behind this whole thing somehow." She saw an opportunity to exercise his critical thinking and asked, "What does he want most at this point in time?"

Harry thought for a moment, and replied, "I reckon either to get a real body back somehow, or to kill me off like he tried to do thirteen years ago."

She considered his words and despite every parenting instinct in the world screaming at her to wrap her boy up in a blanket and rush him off to New Zealand, she could find no fault in his logic.

... --- ...

That evening, Junior disguised as Moody limped out of the castle, onto the grounds towards Hogsmeade. Once he left the castle grounds, he apparated to an area just outside his father's home and limped over to the back door, where he took another sip of that disgusting potion and let himself into the back door.

He limped into the room where his father was staring at the wall, cleared off the uneaten food from the tray, looked at the mail and other papers that Percy had delivered and commanded his father, Sign them and have them ready for Weatherby to pick up in the morning.

Seeing nothing else amiss, he limped out the back door, and reported in to his Master.

“The Potter boy has been entered into the tournament. He’s probably under the delusion that he stands a chance against the older students.”

“Harry Potter cannot be allowed to fail so badly that he is disadvantaged for the third task. Give him a means of participating on an equal footing for the first two tasks. Do not let your hand be seen guiding him. Dumbledore would become suspicious.”

“He is a good flyer,” commenter Pettigrew, trying to be helpful. I have seen him on his broom before. Pettigrew had a nostalgic thought, ‘He flies as good as James.’

“Keep that in mind as you coach him. It may be useful,” commanded Riddle “Take your leave now and return to Hogwarts.”

With that, Junior limped out of the old mansion and returned to the castle.

... --- ...

While Riddle, Pettigrew and Junior were plotting Harry’s downfall, the messy haired teen was having a very candid discussion with Amelia. They discussed the horcruxes, his training, Tonks and other topics. Unlike the Headmaster, Amelia was of the mindset that having the people around her being informed was an advantage not a needless risk.

After Smidgen had brought him yet another butterbeer, Harry asked, “What’s likely to happen when he comes back?”

Amelia had been thinking along the same lines since she’d heard his comments a few hours earlier. She switched her thought process from considering everyday tactics to consider overarching strategy. Harry, when you spoke with the image of Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets he mentioned “How could the greatest wizard of all time be defeated and then some other nonsense. Let’s assume that being the greatest wizard of all time is his ultimate goal. You’re much closer to the age that he was when he spoke those words. What does greatest mean to you?”

Harry replied, "Best I suppose. Making a lasting difference of some kind. Improving the world. That sort of stuff."

She rephrased her question, "What do you suppose that he meant?"

"Probably the most powerful, or controlling the most people or being in power the longest. That sort of stuff. Maybe like Fudge."

She choked on the tea that she'd been sipping on. Certainly Fudge had come to power largely from peddling influence, but on a purely physical basis, wasn't a particularly powerful wizard. She had a mental image of Voldemort and Fudge dueling at ten paces and laughed.

Harry continued, "So many of the Slytherins spew that blood purity crap like they're better than everyone. Their ancestors may have accumulated some gold, but from what I've seen, they don't do better in school. Riddle was no pureblood, but I bet he told everyone that he was. If he came back, just like he was in 1981, he'd have loads of individual magical power. If Inspector Hammer is right about the idea that destroying his horcruxes actually destroys some of his magical strength, he'll need to keep that quiet, or his Death Eaters won't want to follow him around. From what I understand, he's no Lord; he's a half-blood bastard.

Amelia laughed so hard, she actually dropped her teacup. She repaired her cup, then walked over and hugged her teen. After a minute she said, "Harry, I love you so. You're such a delight to talk with."

Harry reveled in the comfort and she said, "Let's get you back to school now. Okay?"

... --- ...

Wednesday 9 November

Ron hadn't spoken with Harry since their fight over a week ago. An unfortunate chain of events that would eventually result in a death

began when Harry accidentally bumped Ron's pumpkin juice goblet with his book bag, knocking it off the table. Harry's quick reflexes allowed him to grab the goblet before it could spill onto the floor and put it back in front of him.

Ron incorrectly assumed that Harry was simply showing off again and replied, "Big man, Potter. Always showing off, even when you mess up."

"Ron, I didn't..."

In far too loud of a voice, Ron cut him off. "Forget it, Potter. It's always the same. You ran off at the World Cup and get to be some big hero, blasting Death Eaters, while I nearly get killed. Thanks a lot."

As Hermione looked over at him in disbelief, McGonagall who had been behind both of them, grabbed Ron by the ear and hissed, "Mr. Weasley, report to my office immediately." Ron hadn't been that loud, but surely a dozen students sitting nearby could have heard him. She gave Dumbledore a significant look.

Albus quickly made his way over and had a quick conversation with Minerva. He did a quick legillimacy scan on the nearby students and to his great relief found that aside from Miss Granger, only Fred and George had been paying even the least attention to the quick-tempered red-head. He walked back to McGonagall who was so angry that she appeared lipless and in a low voice said, "No one new is aware of the situation. Perhaps I will accompany these three for a moment and enjoy the crisp morning air. I'm certain that you will make a sufficient impression on young Mr. Weasley."

She nodded and replied, "I most certainly will. He'll have detention five nights a week with Mr. Filch from now until the Christmas holidays."

Dumbledore considered the circumstances and was about to suggest that the punishment exceeded the offense but considered that if the Aurors heard about it and had their way, Ron would probably be arrested, so he nodded and replied, "Good enough." He went to

collect Fred, George and Hermione, passing Alastor, who had been standing nearby.

... --- ...

Thursday 10 November

Third year Auror Cadet Nymphadora Tonks sat in the waiting room outside Director Bones' office. She differed from the other three cadets in her class in that she had already been on an important operation, destroying the contents of her Aunt Bellatrix's vault. The other cadets had only been on comparatively mundane duties, such as sitting a shift with Eric the ministry guard, processing shoplifting violations and the like.

Tonks was called in and asked to sit down. She looked around the room and noticed that Senior Auror Scrimgeour, Inspector Daily, Senior Inspector Hammer and the Hogwarts Healer Pomfrey were in the other guest chairs in her office.

After she sat down, Scrimgeour began, "Cadet Tonks, please present your cadet badge."

With some trepidation, Tonks unpinned the tin shield from her uniform and handed it over to her supervisor's supervisor. "Sir?"

Scrimgeour examined it for a moment and commented, "I wore this very shield as a cadet, Tonks. You've done it an honor when you wore it. Here is a new one for you." He handed her a gold shield and declared, "We have examined your duty record and to date, it has been exemplary. In recognition of that, you have been promoted to Auror. Congratulations."

Tonks was speechless. It was unheard of to finish Auror training early. She examined the gold shield that had been placed in her hands and read the words In service to the crown – British Auror. She looked at the faces in the room nodding in encouragement and replied, "Thank you, Sir, Ma'am."

Amelia continued, "You will be posted at Hogwarts, ostensibly as Master Healer Pomfrey's Assistant Healer. As such, you will be visible to both the staff and students, though you will not have any scheduled contact with them. You will report to the castle tomorrow. You will keep your contact with the Hogwarts staff to a minimum. Headmaster Dumbledore will also know of your true identity."

Tonks nodded and asked, "What is the objective, Director?"

"Quite simply, to keep your eyes open and protect Harry Potter as needed. As a secondary objective, you have the opportunity to acquire additional proficiency in healing." She explained how Harry had been entered into the tournament by persons unknown and believed that it was a plot initiated by Voldemort himself.

Tonks, who had originally been slightly miffed to have been pulled from the last six months of her training for what she had initially perceived as a babysitting assignment, gave an involuntary shudder of the very real danger that the director described.

Bones continued, "Should you notice anything unusual, you will notify Senior Auror Scrimgeour as soon as possible after you have ensured that Harry is in no immediate danger. Harry will be advised to find you if he is in danger, or notices anything unusual. We don't know who is the immediate threat, so it is imperative that no one else in the castle learns of your true identity. It is my expectation that you will spend at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  time at the castle. Harry is generally away from the castle on Saturday morning, so that would be a good time to get away."

"How long will I be stationed at the castle?" inquired Tonks as she read through the dossier of a healer trainee that she'd been handed.

Scrimgeour replied, "Through the end of the school year or until the bad guys have made a move that requires you to blow your cover."

"How should I respond if Master Auror Moody or the Hogwarts staff ask anything beyond basic questions?"

Amelia replied, "Other than being friendly, they have no reason to question your presence or ask too many questions. Your day-to-day

work assignments will come from Master Healer Pomfrey. Unless Harry or Headmaster Dumbledore ask you anything, you can always evade anyone else's request and defer to her if you need to. Your assignment will remain unknown to anyone other than Harry, Headmaster Dumbledore and the people in this room. If anyone else asks, you have been assigned undercover duty in Brighton. Master Healer Pomfrey will introduce you at dinner tomorrow evening as Susan Florman, a Healer Trainee from New South Wales. Select an appearance so you won't be recognized by either the students or the staff. Good luck, Auror Tonks."

The normally enthusiastic young witch nodded solemnly and stood to leave. Tonks shortened and lightened her hair, thinned her nose and assumed a suntanned appearance of someone who had spent a fair amount of time at the beach. Anna marveled at the change. If she hadn't seen it, she wouldn't have made the connection between the two women.

As they walked out of Amelia's office, Poppy added, "There is a spare two room flat next to mine adjacent to the healing wing of the castle. It's furnished and has an eating area as well as a separate entrance away from the staff wing. You should purchase several uniforms to wear while you are in the castle."

Tonks took a look at the matron and the 1930s style uniform that she wore and rolled her eyes. Poppy had seen the look before and reminded her, "Smithwicks has several styles to choose from. I'm certain that you can find something to your liking, but keep in mind that your goal is not to attract undue attention."

Tonks replied, "Yes, Master Healer, Pomfrey."

"Poppy, Dear. I will call you Susan."

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Friday 11 November



After dinner, Harry walked up to Susan and asked, "Dear Lady, would you do me the honor and accompany this poor knave to visit the village tomorrow?"

Amused at his wit, she made a show of fluttering her eyelashes and replied, "Handsome Squire, I would be delighted to accompany you. A fair damsel never knows when a handsome young squire such as yourself might come in handy." She gave him a sly look and added, "Or perhaps she does have an idea about how he might prove his worth."

Harry gave her a long, appraising look and with a twinkle in his emerald eyes that would turn half of the female population of the castle into mush, replied, "I am at your service, Fair Maiden."

They both started laughing at themselves as they walked off together and in a low voice, Harry added, "I could meet you at The Three Broomsticks at half eleven, or at the front door of the castle if you would prefer?"

She squeezed his hand a bit and replied, "I'll meet you at the pub. It will be less obvious that you were gone for the morning."

"Thanks."

She smiled back at him, gave him a quick kiss and whispered, "Sweet dreams, Harry."

'You have no idea.' He replied, "You too. See ya."

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Saturday 12 November

On Saturday, Harry woke up at half five. After showering, he got dressed and put both wands into his wrist holder, as was his habit. Deep down, he liked the idea of having a backup and wondered if, somehow, it would be possible to use both at once.

As quietly as he could, he made his way down the stairs, through the portrait, and out of the main entrance. As a Champion, he was granted 'run of the castle' privileges, but he had been advised not to be seen leaving, and took Amelia's suggestion seriously.

As he walked to the edge of the castle grounds, Harry took out one of the portkeys that Amelia had made for him. She had given him a box of Popsicle sticks and her instructions were simple. To activate them, just snap one of the sticks with black letters to go to the training site and use the sticks with the red letters to come back to the gates of the castle. He took one end of a black lettered stick in each hand and gave it a quick snap.

Suddenly he felt a jerking feeling and was certain that he'd fall flat on his face. Interestingly enough, a few seconds later, he found himself standing back at the Auror Training Facility with Scrimgeour holding two cups of coffee, as if he were expecting someone.

"Right on time," commented the old Auror. He handed Harry one of the cups and directed, "Let's get started." They walked a ways and the old auror remarked, "I understand that you know a thing or two about quidditch."

Harry nodded and replied, "I'm still learning, but I do all right."

Scrimgeour nodded and asked, "Why don't chasers simply summon the quaffle and banish it into the hoops? While we're at it, why don't you seekers simply summon the snitch?"

Harry thought for a moment and replied, "They're charmed with anti-summoning and anti-banishing charms."

Scrimgeour nodded and pointed to a quaffle and said, "Harry, toss that over here."

He complied and the old Auror caught it with ease, then carried the quaffle over to three chair-sized rocks where he set it on the ground. Scrimgeour declared, "Your goal for the morning is to get this quaffle away from these three rocks where I'll be guarding it. You can use anything that you can see and any spell short of the unforgivables to

help you. You have an hour to get it and you can ask questions during that time to help you. All set?"

Harry nodded and Rufus replied, "Okay. Start."

Harry looked around to see what was available. He had his wands in their holster. There was a broom on the table next to him and a book on quidditch equipment repair. He picked up the broom, got on it and hovered for a moment. His first thought was to swoop down and grab the quaffle before Rufus noticed. He gave it a try, but was pelted by stinging hexes when he got within a hundred feet.

Scrimgeour suggested, "You might get lucky and catch me unawares by doing that, but probably not. Go back to the table and think of a different strategy."

Harry flew over to the table, landed and sat down while Scrimgeour patiently sipped his coffee. The teen thought for a minute and concluded that the book was not there by coincidence. He looked through the table of contents and noticed that there was a chapter on de-charming and re-charming quaffles. He quickly read through the process.

A minute later, he got back on the broomstick, flew to just outside the range where Scrimgeour had started throwing stinging hexes at him the first time and drew his wand. He pointed it at the quaffle and called out "Finite Awkwad."

Scrimgeour saw the charm hit the quaffle solidly and nodded at Harry, who tried the summoning charm on the wooden ball. As they hadn't yet covered the charm in Flitwick's class, his wasn't anywhere near as strong as it could have been, but the quaffle did roll towards him.

Rufus realized what the situation was, and conjured a hundred wooden quaffles, flinging them in every direction. He sat down at the table and directed, "Summon them one at a time and put them over here." He pointed to a spot by the side of the table.

One by one, Harry pointed his wand and called, “Accio Quaffle.” With practice, instead of rolling there, they started flying to him as if someone had soft-tossed them.

When Harry had collected two thirds of them, Scrimgeour called him over and announced, “Take five, Harry.” He handed the teen a cold butterbeer and asked, “When did you learn the summoning charm?”

Harry replied, “Professor Flitwick covers it in charms class next week. Susan and Hermione have had me reading ahead a bit.”

Based on that information, Scrimgeour decided that he was happier with the teen’s work than he would have been otherwise. His ongoing challenge wouldn’t be Potter’s lack of power, speed or skill – he had an abundance of those. Rather, the teen’s highly limited repertoire of spells would be his ongoing concern. He saw that Harry had finished his butterbeer, and suggested, “Go ahead and finish summoning the other quaffles and come back when you’re done.”

Harry cast the summoning charm with much more confidence and most of the balls flew directly into his hand, allowing him to catch them. He was quite pleased with himself as he finished.

Scrimgeour watched as he summoned each of the quaffles. It was obvious that the teen had great eye-hand coordination, but then again, the quaffles weren’t moving.

Harry sat down and had another butterbeer. When he had finished, Scrimgeour told him to stand about thirty feet to his left. Rufus explained, “I’m going to toss these either from your left going right, or straight away from us. I want you to hit as many of them as you can with your blasting charm. Don’t hit me and try to get them before they hit the ground. Ready?”

“Okay.”

He tossed one straight away in a fairly high arc, so Potter would have a few seconds of time to react.

“Reducto.”

Sizzle. The air crackled with his spell, but it didn't connect with anything. The ball hit the ground with a soft thud and rolled another ten yards.

Scrimgeour added, "If you miss again, take a second shot and hit it on the ground. Try to get it before it stops. Ready?" Harry nodded and he tossed another.

"Reducto."

Crack. Potter hit the ball, but not solidly. A piece chipped off of the wooden ball.

"Good. I'm going to start tossing them, more or less continuously. When I'm done, we'll see how many are still in one piece."

"Reducto."

Boom.

"Reducto."

Boom!

"Reducto, Reducto."

Sizzle, Boom!! Having been solidly hit, the ball exploded into a dozen splinters.

When Scrimgeour was done, he surveyed the littered field around him. Not only had the teen fired in excess of a hundred spells within a few minutes, but also no more than a handful of the balls were unmarked. Simply put, the old Auror was impressed. Potter might not know more than a half-dozen or so useful spells, but Scrimgeour was certain that the skinny teen could hold his own in a serious situation.

He called Harry over and said, "After you've taken a break, summon the pieces into a pile. Rather than summon them and expect to catch them, call them and direct them like this." He demonstrated the

summoning charm on one quaffle and at the last second pointed his wand to the ground with an extra flick where he wanted the ball to land.

Harry was tired, but he complied as best he could. “Accio quaffle bits.” He waved his wand in a ten-degree sweeping motion in an attempt to get several at once. To his relief, the idea worked and within a minute, the field was clear.

Scrimgeour handed another butterbeer over to the exhausted teen and explained, “The first task of the tournament is to get a golden egg from a nesting mother dragon without getting yourself killed or badly injured, and ideally without injuring the dragon or the real dragon eggs. Your opponents will probably use advanced transfiguration or a conjunctivitis curse to get by their dragons. In their case, the task is to cleverly apply what they’ve already mastered in an unexpected situation, although I doubt that they won’t have been coached up a bit themselves. In your case, your task will be to employ two charms that you haven’t used before today and get your egg without getting hurt.”

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment and then understood that Rufus was doing his best to keep him alive and secondarily level the playing field, nothing more. He asked, “How did you find out about the tasks?”

Scrimgeour smiled a bit at the thought and replied, “I went to see Percy Weasley the other day while carrying a set of anti-apparation manacles. He got so shook up when he saw me approach his desk that he literally soiled himself. As soon as he cleaned himself up and realized that I wasn’t there to escort him to Azkaban, he told me about the three tasks. Unfortunately, his confidence came back, and after a tic he was back to being an arrogant twink again. She should have given him a two-week tour of duty there, just to keep him tolerable. We’ll talk about the other two tasks after you get through the first one. Okay?”

He took the empty bottles and banished them into the waste bin, then announced, “Same time next Saturday, Harry. Good work. Next week, we’re going to work on improving your agility.”

Harry nodded and thanked the Auror for his time and help. He pulled out one of the Popsicle sticks with red letters, snapped it and vanished.

... --- ...

Susan and Hannah walked around together for an hour and were about to go into The Three Broomsticks, when Harry fast-walked up to them. He was obviously winded from his morning work and walking or running to the pub. Susan gave him a warm smile and whispered, "Hold still." He complied and she cast a freshening charm on him.

Harry looked at himself and replied, "Thanks."

She beamed at him and replied, "No worries. Hannah's mum taught it to us last summer. Would you like to go in now?"

"Please. I'm famished."

She wrapped him in a hug and whispered, "Be certain to have your story ready. You were out exercising and practicing by the lake."

Harry squeezed her back, appreciating the soft feeling and replied, "Thanks."

They walked in together and Harry asked, "Hannah, would you care to join us?"

She smiled and replied, "Thanks for asking, but Neville asked me to go to the Herbologist shop with him. Thanks anyway."

They sat down and ordered lunch. Harry ate everything as he was quite hungry, but mostly he realized that he missed the physical closeness that the two of them had enjoyed during the days at the Bones home in Welshpool. Susan must have felt the same way too. When they were finishing their lunch, she admitted, "I miss this, just sitting around and having lunch together."

Harry nodded and replied, "Me too. I miss swimming together."

“Aqua-man.”

“Mermaid.”

They smiled at each other and laughed. Susan suggested, “I don’t need anything else here today. If you do, let’s get it, otherwise, let’s go for a walk around the lake.”

They walked around the lake for a while and sat down by one of the large beech trees that surrounded the edge of the lake. Harry asked, “What would you like to do?”

‘Snog you senseless,’ thought Susan, though she replied, “Let’s play the question game again. We haven’t done that for a while.”

Harry suggested, “Ask away, Fair Maiden.”

She complied, asking, “How did it go with Rufus?”

“Fine. Actually, it went really well. We practiced the summoning charm quite a bit and we talked about quidditch. I got to practice spells while riding a broom. He’s easy to talk to, and very patient with me. He told me what I can and cannot discuss with people and answered all of my questions.”

Susan nodded, understanding that he had told her the truth, but also that there was more, and he’d been told not to talk about it. A lifetime of conversing with her Aunt Amelia had conditioned her into accepting that some things were better left unsaid. She nodded and replied, “Your turn.”

Harry asked, “Does Hannah like Neville?”

“Lots. Does he like her?”

Harry smiled at the thought and replied, “Yes, but he’ll be slow in telling her.”

Screwing up her own courage for a moment, she asked, “Would you be happy if we became a bit more than friends?”



"Yes. I think we're more than friends right now. We live in the same house and have the same guardian..."

"No, Goof. I meant boyfriend and girlfriend."

A bit slow on the uptick, Harry finally caught the meaning of her question and asked, "Would you like to be my girlfriend?"

Eyes bright, she replied, "Yes, very much. Would you like to be my boyfriend?"

"Yes. Very much."

She smiled at him and observed, "Well, that wasn't so hard. Are you nervous about the first task?"

He thought about her question for a moment and replied, "Not too bad. I've got a plan and two weeks to practice with. Compared to some of the other situations that I've gotten myself in, this one feels pretty good. Are you worried?"

Without hesitation, Susan replied, "I'm scared for you." She considered her words for a moment and added, "Really, I'm concerned for you. I worry about what's behind this that we aren't seeing. Between Professor Dumbledore, Auntie, the Ministry Heads and Riddle, I feel like we've only been shown a little piece of this God-forsaken game that they've asked you to play."

Harry thought about her words, put his arm around her in a comforting fashion, and replied, "I agree with you about Dumbledore and the Ministry games people, but Amelia, Connie, Rufus and Anna have been great. They've treated me like an adult, asked my opinion and as far as I can tell, given me the final say. I feel a lot more in control than last year, when Sirius was supposedly out to get me. He was the one who ended up telling me that he was my Godfather. Dumbledore never mentioned a word."

She nodded but didn't say anything. She wasn't sure where Harry wanted Mr. Black to fit into their lives and she didn't want to push the

issue until he was ready to talk about it. She asked, "What did everyone say about Skeeter's article about the wand weighing?"

Harry replied, "Most of the Gryffindors understood that she threw that stupid slant on the story. I didn't say but five words to her before Amelia found me and pulled me out of that broom closet. Maybe Skeeter was mad because she locked the door behind me after I left."

Susie nodded and said, "She missed the point of the tournament being about magical cooperation and turned it into a coming out party for the Boy-Who-Lived. She's so annoying, but I did like your picture." She kissed him on the lips and said, "We should get going."

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That evening after dinner, Cedric was walking the halls when he observed Draco Malfoy giving a fifth year Ravenclaw some buttons and showing him how to work them. They would flash between Support Cedric Diggory – The real Hogwarts Champion and Potter Stinks! The Head Boy's sense of fair play kicked in and by the end of the evening, the buttons had been confiscated, Malfoy had shot his mouth off enough to earn a month of detention with Filch and his mother had been notified.

Although his intent had been cruel, even Malfoy's head of house had to admit that the blond haired teen's execution had been brainless. On the way back to the Slytherin dormitories, Snape twisted the unruly teen's ear and admonished, "Your sense of cleverness was pathetic, Mr. Malfoy. No one cares to debate against an idiot." He shook his head in disgust and added, "When you are done enjoying Mr. Filch's company, you can spend another week scrubbing cauldrons by hand."

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Friday 25 November

The night before the first challenge, Susan and Hermione dragged Harry out of the castle to go for a walk after dinner. He was headed into one of his silent funks and the two witches were having none of it.

They sat him down by a large beech tree after Hermione transfigured a scrap of parchment into a wool blanket that they all could sit on.

As Harry and Susan had been talking about what it would be like when they moved back home with Amelia and Smidgen, Susan asked, "Hermione, what are your parents like?"

The bushy haired witch was surprised, to say the least. While she had previously explained to Harry what they did for a living and had been subjected to a handful of inane comments from Ron, she couldn't recall anyone else from the wizarding world taking the time to ask what they were like, as people. She replied, "My Dad takes things as they come. He served in the military for a while when I was a baby and he saw his share of action in the Falklands. I think it changed him to the point where he doesn't get excited when little things come up. Mum is wound a little tighter, like I am, I suppose."

Susan noticed that Harry did his best to suppress a smile as she mentioned that point.

Hermione continued, "Mum's pretty smart. She likes to read a lot and ski. Dad does most of the cooking and outside stuff, whereas Mum likes to grow roses. They're both accepting of what and who I am. I suppose that since there are only the three of us, we're closer than some families. They included me in loads of activities and tried to be a friend when I didn't have any."

She thought for a moment and continued, "I think their life has changed a bit since I went off to school. They go out together two or three times a week. They're their own best friends."

Susan nodded and replied, "Auntie's older, obviously. She encouraged me to stay close to the Abbotts. We really didn't go on vacation trips much, but we did go on a lot of one-day outings, especially with Connie." She thought for a second and added, "None of us had any brothers or sisters; well Harry had that lump of a butt-face cousin, but I don't think that counts. The three of us are alike in that way."

Hermione smiled and Susan continued, "Auntie didn't push magic on me. I wasn't asked to read through my first-year books by the time that I was nine or anything. Thanks to Harry, the years were quiet and I spent a lot of fun afternoons with Hannah and her Mum."

Hermione asked, "Did your Aunt talk much about your Mum and Dad?"

Susan gave a thoughtful look at Harry and replied, "Not as much as Hannah's Mum. They were best friends forever and she'd tell us stories of when they were little girls together – the same age that we were at the time. There was this one time when they were six..."

Harry listened carefully to Susan's story, but couldn't help consider that he knew nothing of either his Mum or his Dad when they were little. The few stories that Professor Lupin had told him were from their Hogwarts years, and most had been from their fifth or sixth year. He didn't know anyone who knew either of them as children.

Hermione kept the conversation going by asking, "Susan, what do you do for fun?"

She glanced at Harry and replied, "Keeping this goof in line is turning out to be a full-time job, but I also like to swim, read, go to movies and visit with Hannah. We go shopping with her Mum. She's better at shopping for clothes. Auntie still sees me as being nine." Hermione made eye contact and nodded, without embarrassing Harry with the particulars of being growing teenage girls.

They continued chatting for the rest of the evening, ostensibly to visit. In reality, they kept Harry from sliding into a funk, obsessing about the first challenge that was scheduled to take place the next day.

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Still livid from the rattlesnake incident the previous time the old buzzard had come by, McGonagall had been waiting for her chance.

“Detention Mr. Crow. What is this talk about a half-blood bastard?” Looking at his disheveled appearance, she demanded, “Where have you been?”

The old scribe couldn’t remember how to spell Tijuana, nor exactly what had happened, so he just pointed to the Mizuno iron that was on her wall along with the other artifacts that he’d brought her over the years.

Instead he carefully placed the roll of parchment and a carefully printed card on her desk and rode off on his steel horse.

The old Professor examined the card, which read Robst 5043968

Perhaps she’d been too hard on the scribe.

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Please pray for Mike.

## Chapter Eleven

### The First Task

Saturday 26 November

... --- ...

As the two witches found their seats just before the start of the first task, Connie voiced the words that Amelia had previously thought to herself - "What lapse of sanity possessed you to allow Harry to compete in this awful event? That dragon nearly took the Delacour girl's head off. My God, it's got her backed into a corner! She's going to get killed!"

Amelia took a calming breath; as she watched the young woman, not more than a few years older than her Susie, struggle with the huge Welsh Green. Just as the teen made a grab for the egg, the dragon, which had momentarily been distracted by a Confundus charm that the contestant had cast, blew a fireball in the girl's direction, setting her cloak and hair on fire. The young witch had obtained her prize, but would have lasting burn marks over much of her back.

"What the hell was Barty thinking coming up with these monsters as challenges for teenagers?" demanded an enraged Connie.

"I haven't a clue," admitted Amelia. "He missed the last staff meeting, and sent Arthur's son in his place. That boy needs to learn some humility, and soon. He's so full of himself." Changing the subject, she added, "I hope Amos's boy, Cedric is okay. He looks like he was badly burned by the Short Snout after it ate the dog that he'd transfigured out of that rock."

Connie shook her head in wonder and commented, "He'll be fine, but at least he signed up for it. Who's next?"

"The Durmstrang boy, Victor Krum. When I get my hands on whoever put Harry's name in that goblet, they'll have a very bad day."

A few minutes later, Connie commented, "Krum must have hit her with a Conjunctivitis curse. Look at that, she's squashed her eggs! Fireballs are practically extinct. What were the organizers thinking?"

"I don't know," admitted Amelia. "I expect that they weren't thinking at all. Actually, I believe that Bagman arranged this first task."

"That idiot probably set it up to have a flutter on who would come out alive. He should be chasing the dragons around that pit himself if he thinks it's such a great idea. I hope the moneylenders catch up with him and choke him."

A few minutes later, the gang of dragon handlers put the next dragon in place with a series of complicated switching spells.

Connie gasped and nearly shouted, "Good Lord, that's a Hungarian Horntail! The Short Snout looked like a puppy compared to that monster! Fourth years haven't learned enough spells yet to properly put that monster down, let alone get away. It's seen him. She looks like she'll tear him to bits..."

Amelia closed her eyes for a moment and cleared her head of her friend's colorful play-by-play commentary. Test his mettle... when she got a hold of that nosey, interfering, my-ideas-are-always-right wizard, she'd give him a few choice words. She knew that it was Harry's turn next, but barely dared to look; silently praying that Rufus's assistance would be enough. For nearly a minute the field was silent.

Suddenly Connie exclaimed, "Good Lord, Amelia, look at that!!!" Harry had somehow summoned his broom from nearly a mile away and he was flying right above the dragon's head, circling and weaving back and forth in a hypnotic pattern. She saw him pull his wand out and cast several spells in the direction of the egg while attempting to dodge the enraged Horntail.

Whoosh! He dove down and summoned the egg, just as the evil dragon's razor sharp tail sliced into his side.

“Poor Harry. That had to hurt.” Even from a distance, she could see the crimson bloodstain blossoming on his shirt. She followed Connie down the stairs of the stands as they hurriedly made their way to the medical tent.

Somehow, Harry managed to stay on his broom and fly back to the starting point as a dozen of the dragon wranglers subdued the offended and angry mother dragon.

A few minutes later, Amelia smiled as she saw Susie and Hermione rush towards Harry. The bushy haired young witch stood back beaming at her best friend with pride while Susie gave him a bone crushing hug and kiss, only to realize that she had squeezed him too hard as she felt him wince. Knowing his high tolerance for pain, Amelia concluded that it was more than a scratch regardless of what he would eventually tell her.

Connie waited with the girls on the other side of the privacy screen as Amelia stood by Harry while Poppy carefully cleaned out the wound. While over a foot long, it appeared to Connie to be fairly clean, and not extremely deep. Amelia held his hand as Harry gave a slight whimper when the disinfecting fluid was applied. Amelia promised herself that she’d get Harry a dragonhide vest before the next infernal task. Poppy finished her work and remarked, “Dragons...What fool decided that bringing dragons into a school full of children would be a good idea?”

As if on cue, Ludo Bagman walked in to check on the conditions of the three injured champions. He was about to remark that the first task was a smashing success and that Harry had the fastest time when he noticed that Amelia had seen him. Better judgment prevailed, and he made a very quick exit from the tent and went back to the judging stands. The scores were announced and Harry was in the lead by a slim margin.

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Ron Weasley was about to come in and apologize to Harry when he saw his dad’s boss standing by Harry looking extremely angry, and



decided that this wasn't the best time to come in and try and make some semblance of peace with his former friend. He mentally kicked himself for having said all of those stupid and jealous things in the first place.

He knew that his temper was going to get him in serious trouble someday. He just hoped that it wouldn't be too soon.

... --- ...

The evening after the first task, the four law enforcement officers left the pensieve that contained the memory that Rufus had managed to obtain from a very reluctant Horace Slughorn earlier in the afternoon. They took a moment to reflect on what they'd witnessed. Finally Amelia asked, "What did you see?"

Anna observed, "Slughorn had said that seven would be the best number. We don't know if Riddle interpreted his words to be seven plus one or six plus one, but based on Connie's research, I'm not certain that it matters."

Amelia wrote seven plus one on her notepad and asked, "What else?"

Scrimgeour said, "It was sixth year potions, so most likely he had already made the diary that Harry destroyed. His phrasing of the question implied that he'd barely even heard of them and he'd already made one. The sneaky bastard."

Amelia wrote sixth year on her pad and asked, "What else?"

Connie observed, "Riddle was wearing a ring with a large, flat black stone on the ring finger of his left hand. If that was Gaunt's ring, it is likely that it was the second horcrux that he'd created, meaning it would have a quarter-size bit within it. Also, it hadn't yet occurred to him to go and hide them. We could confirm that by getting a seventh year memory and checking to see if he was still wearing it, but he probably wanted his mates to see that he was wearing a Slytherin artifact."

Amelia wrote find additional memory on her notepad and asked, "What else?"

Scrimgeour added, "It's reasonable to believe that Slughorn could have guessed what really happened to Riddle in 1981. We're starting on this scavenger hunt looking for these bloody horcruxes thirteen years later than we should be. If that fat suck-up had had an ounce of decency, he would have said something to someone years ago."

Connie rubbed her forehead and replied, "True, but he couldn't be charged as an accessory to every murder that Riddle committed since 1981 without our disclosing that we know about the existence of the horcruxes. We could get our pound of flesh, but who knows what it would really cost?"

Amelia nodded and remarked, "Agreed. Rufus, well done coaching Harry on the first task." She made eye contact and added a heartfelt, "Thank you. What do you have in mind for the next few weeks?"

Scrimgeour replied, "I'm going to work on building up his magical endurance and making use of cutting charms. We're through thinking about just stunning these scum when they attack. He's got good accuracy and outstanding eye-hand coordination. He just hasn't learned a full complement of spells yet"

Amelia could find no fault in his logic and replied, "Thank you all. Good night."

... --- ...

While Director Bones and the others were examining Slughorn's memory, Junior was reporting to his master regarding the first challenge. "Potter made it through the first task in one piece, Master. He has a slight lead for first place."

Voldemort replied, "That is good, Barty. How much did you have to help him?"

Junior admitted, “Not a bit, Master. When I kept him after class, and asked him, he told me that he had worked it out. One of the dragon handlers is the brother of his friend. He must have told him the nature of the task. His little pals must have read about charming and uncharming quidditch balls. His actual execution was pretty basic.”

Riddle considered Crouch’s reply for a minute and could find no fault with his conclusions. Potter’s performance was well thought out, but was certainly more simplistic than what he himself could have accomplished as a fourth year. Riddle replied, “Be certain that he does not fail in the second task.”

Junior bowed and was dismissed and limped out of the old mansion before apparating back to the castle.

After Junior took his leave, Voldemort sent Pettigrew on an errand. Riddle wanted to be alone for a while. In truth he was concerned. There had been only the vaguest references to the homunculus form that he had assumed after he’d met up with Wormtail. In muggle terms, the issue of shelf-life was on his mind. He had no way of knowing if his current form would remain viable for months or another year or more. For some reason, he felt weaker than when Wormtail had brought his wand back.

He cast several spells with his own wand. The first two seemed normal to him, but as he continued, he began to tire quickly.

Riddle believed that the key to achieving the strongest form was to use the blood of the strongest enemy that he could. Dumbledore was undoubtedly strong, but Riddle lacked the means of subduing him, and he was nearly 140 years of age – hardly a man in his prime that Riddle would wish to aspire to become. No, Potter was the correct choice. He would have Junior attempt to inconspicuously hand the boy a portkey the next time there was a Hogsmeade weekend.

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While Junior was visiting with the Dark Lord, Lucius paid an unannounced visit to Cornelius Fudge’s home. Fudge’s house elf answered the door and showed the blonde haired wizard with the

cruel walking stick into the well-appointed waiting room. "Please waits here, Master Malfoy. I will gets Master Fudge right away." The little elf scurried off to help his master get presentable to receive such an important visitor.

Malfoy waited patiently for several minutes until Fudge came into the room. He was wearing slippers and a silk robe. His hair was damp, but he was presentable. He greeted his guest, "Lucius, this is an unexpected surprise. Did I forget an appointment?"

Lucius stood while Fudge entered the room and put a subservient look on his face before starting. "Forgive my intrusion, Minister, but I have a matter of some urgency to bring to your attention."

Fudge looked and saw the heavy bulge in Malfoy's pocket and asked, "How may I help you, Lucius? Speckles, bring us a bottle of single malt and two glasses."

The little elf hurried to comply with his master's order and Fudge suggested, "Please have a seat. How may I be of assistance?"

Lucius began his rehearsed conversation, "Minister, I became aware of some information regarding the convict, Black that I thought you would wish to know about."

Fudge sputtered, "Sirius Black? Is he here?"

"No, Minister. A colleague of mine saw him in the magical section of Cyprus not twenty minutes ago, and he immediately contacted me. I personally lack the resources to act on the Ministry's behalf and apprehend him, but knew that you would be in a better position to act and would want to do the right thing."

Fudge frowned a bit at the information. Cypress did not observe extradition laws, and he couldn't legally demand that Black be apprehended and returned to Britain to face justice. He took a sip of the ancient whiskey that his visitor had previously given him as a Christmas gift and admitted, "Amelia or Rufus would never go for a clandestine grab on foreign soil."

Lucius suggested, "Perhaps your personal guard detail would not be such sticklers for those bothersome details. I wish I had the means to help you myself."

Fudge watched as he reached into his pocket and pulled out the large sack of galleons. Malfoy put a friendly look on his face and offered, "I was going to drop off this donation that I managed to collect to the ministry pension fund tomorrow, but unexpected appointments came up. It's only ten thousand galleons, but I would appreciate it if you could drop it off for me." He made a show of looking at his watch and added, "I do apologize, but I need to return home."

"I understand Lucius. Thank you for coming over. I'll contact Dawlish and Franken right away. You said the wand shop?"

"Yes, but my associate mentioned that Black had a fitting scheduled immediately after at the robe shop next to the wandcrafter. I do hope you have some success in apprehending such a dangerous criminal. I'll take my leave, Minister. Good night."

As the blonde haired wizard walked out the door, Fudge practically ran to the fireplace to call his four bodyguards. Malfoy knew that Fudge wouldn't insist on such niceties as a live capture. In fact, he was counting on it, based on the belief that his son, Draco was in line to inherit the remainder of the Black fortune.

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Tuesday 29 November

After the dinner had been served, Headmaster Dumbledore stood and said, "May I have your attention?"

Immediately the mass of students grew silent. Susan watched as he stroked his beard once and his eyes gave off their twinkle that no longer amused her. Dumbledore waited some ten seconds for the quiet to become noticeable and announced, "In keeping with the traditions of the tri-wizard tournament, the four champions will be

hosting a Yule Ball on 24 December. Fourth years and above are invited and may invite a younger student if desired.”

Instinctively, the teenage girl in Susan kicked in, and she made eye-contact with Harry. He mouthed, “Will you go with me, please?” and she beamed, nodded and mouthed, “Yes!” She noticed that Ron, who was sitting next to Neville, had the deer-in-the-headlight, blank stare in his eyes. Neville was searching for Hannah, who was temporarily blocked from his view by the massive form of Stebbins.

Hermione had one of those fleeting moments when she wished that things had been different between her and Harry, then glanced at Ron for a moment and silently shook her head. Serious dating wasn’t important to her at the moment, but being occasionally remembered would be nice.

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While Hermione was pondering her prospects for being escorted to the Yule Ball, two young German women on holiday were chattering away in an upscale London restaurant. They didn’t pay the least bit of attention to the two older well-dressed men sitting at the next table with a bottle of single malt set between them.

Stephen Nott asked his long-time friend Lucius Malfoy, “What do you think will happen?”

Malfoy replied, “Some will return to his service when he calls. We don’t know what form he will acquire. He may return with his old strength, or he may simply return. My question is, who is he to lead our pureblood society? I’ve learned that his father was merely a common muggle and one without honor at that.”

Nott asked, “What do you mean? He’s the heir of Slytherin. He can speak with serpents.”

Lucius set his glass down and replied, “So he says. The fact remains that the Potter boy is of purer blood and he also speaks the parseltongue. It is proper to believe in our right as part of the aristocracy to rule our world. I subscribe to the traditional values as

much as he claims to. We lost most of our fortune and respect trying to stay out of prison when the Dark Lord fell. Is that what you want for your sons and daughters?"

Nott admitted, "No, but you're suggesting a dangerous path, Lucius."

The blonde haired wizard sneered and commented, "I'm merely observing that there may not be any safe paths. Some have felt his Mark begin to strengthen and have chosen to leave. Tudberry sold his estate last week and is said to have retired somewhere in the southwest United States. Do you think he'll answer his call? I expect Karkarov will leave at the conclusion of the tournament and quickly disappear into Eastern Europe."

Nott asked, "Have you spoken with the others?"

Malfoy admitted, "Not yet. I wanted to hear your opinion first."

The Welshman replied, "I only envision three choices – Flee now and pretend that you never felt anything, stay and hope that he never returns, or wait and see what calls us before deciding what to do. There is no hope in joining Dumbledore and the blood traitors. The Dark Lord will go after them first."

"Perhaps, but you lost your wife and oldest son in the last war. I lost my brother and his entire family. The Aurors gave as good as they got. Our attempts to keep them weak through lack of funding will only go so far if he returns in a weakened condition. We are not cannon fodder to be used to buy him time."

Nott asked, "What about Bulstrode and Yaxley. How are they?"

Malfoy replied, "They told their families that they were injured in a muggle automobile accident and treated in a muggle hospital. Apparently their families believed their story. They are weak-minded and will answer the call of anyone with strength."

Nott asked, "Did you find out who fired the Dark Lord's Mark at the World Cup?"

Lucius eyed the two women at the table next to him and, concluding that they were chattering about nothing, replied, “No one has admitted having done so. Perhaps it was old man Crouch, hoping to capture one of us as some sort of vengeance for corrupting his son.”

Stephen shook his head and replied, “The boy joined of his own free will, as we all did. Unfortunately, it cost him his life.” Changing the subject, Nott added, “Show me your arm, Lucius.”

Malfoy looked around again, saw that no one was looking and exposed his left arm. The outline of the Dark Mark was definitely visible, though the inside was only faintly shaded. He looked at Nott’s brand, which was about the same, and commented, ‘It’s much darker than last spring, but seems a bit lighter than it was when school started.”

Nott nodded and asked, “What do you think it means?”

Malfoy poured them both another finger of the single malt and replied, “The Dark Lord will likely return in the next year. Who knows how much power he’ll bring with him? Time will tell, old friend.” With that he drained his glass and added, “We’ll talk again in January.”

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The old scribe was disappointed. Some of the readers had failed to follow wizarding etiquette, and McGonagall hadn’t given them attention. He looked at the old slip of paper that he’d found in his pocket that read Lansydyr – Royal Flush and recalled that it was a report from a fellow scribe that had apparently been shipped off to a foreign war.

McGonagall watched as Crow got off of his steel horse and walked towards the castle. For the moment, at least, she had things on her mind besides assigning detention to inconsiderate readers. She launched into him the moment that he walked into the door. “They are fourteen. Mr. Crow. You will keep that in mind, especially regarding Miss Bones.”



The old scribe had a devilish look on his face that clearly indicated that he had other ideas and walked off, thinking to himself, 'Accidents can happen.'

The Transfiguration professor had a very uneasy feeling about what would happen next.

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## Chapter Twelve

### Hogsmeade

Wednesday 30 November

The witches were chattering nonstop as they left Transfiguration that morning. Professor Dumbledore had announced some of the specifics about the Yule Ball and while the few fourth years that were dating were excited, the majority of the students were either nervous, or flat-out panicked.

After class had been dismissed, McGonagall called, "Mr. Potter, please remain after class. I'd like a word."

As his classmates threw him sympathetic looks, Harry inquired, "What is it, Professor?"

"Two things. First, well done on the first challenge. Professor Flitwick was particularly pleased with your choice and remarkable demonstration of summoning charms." She gave him an appraising look and decided that it was better not hearing how he had known what anti-summoning charm had been used on the golden egg and how to remove it. Instead, she asked, "Are you aware that the Yule Ball is first and foremost a dance?"

"Yes, Professor."

"And are you aware that the Champions are expected to attend, have a partner and lead the first dance?"

"Yes, Professor."

In a more sympathetic tone she inquired, "Do you know how to dance, Mr. Potter?"

Harry admitted, "No, Professor, but Susan is giving me lessons two nights a week so I won't make a complete fool of myself."

McGonagall relaxed a bit at his response and asked, "Is it fair to assume that you have, in fact, asked Miss Bones to accompany you to the ball?"

"Yes, Professor. I asked her as soon as I heard about it."

She looked at him and nodded in acceptance, "Very good, Mr. Potter. Please encourage your fellow Gryffindors to be equally prepared."

"Yes, Professor."

"Very well, Mr. Potter. You are excused. Enjoy your lunch."

... --- ...

That afternoon, as Susan and Harry were outside walking on the school grounds when a green and yellow parrot flew down and landed on Harry's shoulder. Susan gave a laugh and joked, "Harry, you look like a pirate." She gave the colorful parrot a pet and took the owl treat that her boyfriend handed to her as she allowed the hungry bird to nibble on it. After it had finished, she carefully untied the note and held the feathery carrier until Harry could write a reply.

Harry looked at the note and read,

Harry,

Tijuana is great. The women are quite friendly and the fishing is outstanding. By the way, what in the world possessed you to take on a dragon?

Study hard. Stay in school.

Uncle Sylvester

Susan gave Harry a look worthy of McGonagall and suggested, "Let's see what he really had to say."

Slightly embarrassed by the front side of the note, Harry tapped the paper and said, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

The back page was suddenly filled with a second note.

Snuffles will be returning to London for the holidays. Moony will know how to reach him. If you have the time, he'd like to see you. Let your guardian know what you're doing.

I had a close call in Cypress, but the Auror who found me mentioned Fudge, not the normal channels. I suspect someone here recognized me and contacted Malfoy, who would have gladly paid for the information. Besides, Cypress has no extradition laws, and there was no legal way that I could have been taken in.

I'll be careful. You two do the same.

Love,

Sirius.

Harry wrote back,

Please go back to the pet shop. I don't want to lose you.

Love,

Harry

Susan picked up the parchment, put on a bit of lip gloss and gave the parchment a kiss, leaving lip prints just below Harry's messy boy writing.

He looked at it, smiled and asked, "Why did you do that?"

Susan replied, "That way, he'll know it was from me too, without you having to mention my name. Are you going to show this to Auntie?"

Harry replied, "I'll tell her about it, instead." He cast Incendio on the original parchment and ground the ashes into the grass. When he

was done he added, "I'd be happier knowing that he was safe somewhere until Pettigrew turns up than see him once and have him get hurt or..."

She saw that he was clearly worried about his godfather's safety, but didn't know what to say. She snuggled up to him and he felt her warmth against the cool evening air.

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Saturday 3 December

The Senior Auror watched as the Potter boy blasted each quaffle that he tossed out at five-second intervals. Ten minutes later, he looked out at the practice grounds and saw a sea of splinters. Taking a break, he directed, "When we start again, I want you to use a cutting hex on the next set." He demonstrated by pointing his wand at one of the wooden balls and called, "Diffindo."

The ball that he had targeted was sliced neatly into two pieces. Harry nodded in appreciation and drank his butterbeer.

After Harry had finished, Scrimgeour started tossing the quaffles. Harry hit one and while there was a sizeable gash in it, the ball remained in one piece.

Rufus directed, "Try again. Put a bit more muscle behind it. The goal in this case is to put the bad guys down, not simply slice through their expensive robes." He tossed another.

"Diffindo!"

Two cleaved halves fell neatly to the ground.

Scrimgeour tossed another dozen and saw the same results each time. He tried tossing two at once.

"Diffindo, diffindo."

Harry had hit one in the air, but the other had hit the ground by the time he'd pointed at the second quaffle and called out the spell.

Scrimgeour called him over and placed two balls on the ground about two feet apart. As he cast the spell, he drew out the word, "Dif-fin-do" and waved his wand at both balls. He explained, "If you're facing more than one bad guy, this is one of a handful of easier spells that can take down two at the same time."

Harry looked at the quaffles and saw a sizeable gash in both balls. Scrimgeour tossed two balls straight away from Harry and the teen called "Dif-fin-do!" He made it last nearly two seconds and flicked his wand at the second ball after he'd made contact with the first. To his utter amazement, both balls split in half before they hit the ground!

Rufus encouraged, "Outstanding! Try a few more." He tossed several pairs three or four feet apart and each time observed the same results. Within a few minutes, Harry had ripped through the remaining quaffles to Scrimgeour's delight.

The old Auror transfigured another half dozen and set them on the ground about twenty-five feet away from Harry in various directions. He directed, "Now try hitting them with your left hand."

As expected, Harry's results were nowhere near as good. Scrimgeour encouraged him, saying, "This is a really useful skill to work on." In fact, many an Auror's life had been saved or lost based on their ability to continue fighting after their wand arm had been lost or disabled.

At they were finishing up, Scrimgeour announced, "Next week, we'll work some more on weak-hand casting." He transfigured a stick into a quarter inch diameter rod about a foot long that resembled Harry's wand, and suggested, "Practice with this when you get a chance. You don't have to say anything. Just point it at something instinctively and look to check to see how close you came. Find an empty classroom to practice so you don't accidentally poke someone's eye out."

Harry nodded and replied, "I will, Sir."

Nodding, Scrimgeour inquired, "Potter, can you swim?"

Harry replied, "A bit, Sir. Susan gave me some lessons last summer."

Scrimgeour nodded and suggested, "When you get home for Christmas break, have Amelia cast a warming charm on the pool. I want you to practice kicking for an hour a day to build up your endurance. Every other day, I want you to practice for a second hour after you've rested up, except swim laps using your arms only. It will go a long way to build up your arm strength as well as your endurance. Any questions?"

"No Sir, and thank you for spending your time, helping me."

"No worries, Potter. Have a good week."

"You too, Sir."

As he went back to his office, the old Auror wished to himself that the other Aurors took their own training as seriously as the rail-thin teen.

... --- ...

Wormtail scrubbed endlessly on the hundred-gallon cauldron. It had taken a muggle moving company to deliver the ancient container, which had recently been painted red and sold as a decorative planter.

His master insisted that he remove all of the paint without using magic and that the iron cauldron be scrubbed, and as clean as the day that it had been cast.

Pettigrew cursed his luck as he felt another blister develop on his thumb. If he had to change into his rat form anytime soon, he just knew that he would be hobbling around in a limp.

He continued scrubbing.

... --- ...

Saturday 10 December

All in all, Riddle considered the plan to be an acceptable risk. Barty/Moody was to hand Harry a portkey disguised as a galleon that was set to activate one minute later. Barty was to pass it to Potter between one PM and half one, hopefully without anyone else seeing him placing it in Potter's pocket.

Riddle would wait right by the portkey target site with Wormtail acting as backup. Barty would go back to the castle immediately afterward and maintain his cover until he was contacted.

If they succeeded in capturing the boy, Wormtail would start on the complex potion that would return him to his own, stronger body.

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Rufus exercised considerable patience in attempting to teach Harry the Bubble Head charm. Whereas the messy hair teen could cast such offensive spells such as Reducto or Diffindo as well, or better than many of the Aurors or staff, holding the Bubble Head charm simply eluded the young teen.

Scrimgeour knew that Potter was trying, but the reality was that he was failing at the charm and Scrimgeour was unwilling to have Potter risk his life on mastering a charm that simply wasn't working for him.

"Take a break, Harry. We'll think of another way to work through this if the Bubble Head isn't for you."

In truth, the lad was doing an outstanding job for a fourteen year old. Unfortunately, the other challenges that Potter was facing in his life weren't fourteen. There was a reason that the Bubble Head charm was a NEWT standard that wasn't usually covered until seventh year. It was a charm that required that the castor hold it for an extended time. Potter was very good at short, focused spells such as the Blasting Hex, which required a concentrated burst of magic.

Harry had a sufficiently large magical core to release a series of high-powered bursts of magic. As such, he was one of the few wizards



who could cast Reducto or Diffindo a hundred-fifty times in a row and remain standing.

What he currently lacked was the long-term control to hold a spell for an hour or more, while focused on a different activity. Scrimgeour envisioned the second challenge – Swimming for an hour in dark water, keeping an eye out for dangerous creatures, working with his hands and towing a hostage. There certainly was the added possibility of having to cast a hex to chase off a grindilow or similar water creature. No, the Bubble Head charm wouldn't be a good fit for the lad. Perhaps Amelia or Connie would have a better idea for him to try.

Not one to miss an opportunity to put a positive spin on a trainee's progress, he suggested, "Harry, if you have a chance this week, I'd like you to try to see how long you can hold a Diffindo charm. Go out by Hagrid's or someplace that you won't be seen and cut up a log or two. Have fun this afternoon. I'll see you next week. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Rufus." With that, he took one of the red lettered Popsicle sticks and gave it a snap. A second later, he had vanished.

... --- ...

It was a great mid December afternoon. The sun was shining and it was unseasonably warm out. As a result, Hogsmeade was jammed. Besides the usual Hogwarts crowd, the visitors from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons were also out to enjoy the fine weather.

Rita Skeeter and her photographer, Bozo were waiting outside The Three Broomsticks, hoping to get a few photos and an interview with any of the champions or teaching staff. She didn't feel the need to get more than a sentence or two from them to work into several stories that she had in mind, ranging from prospects for the next challenge, the unexpected lead held by the youngest champion, any budding interschool romances, or the like. She had the feeling that opportunity was knocking for a major story. Unfortunately, she had no idea that the real story was standing four feet to her left.

Rita's instructions to her photographer were clear – Get a few dozen photos. Be certain to have the pub in the background, so people can see where the shots had been taken from. His priority would be – Potter with anyone, Potter alone, the other champions, or other breaking news.

They stood in the sunshine, waiting.

... --- ...

Harry was a few minutes late and ran the entire distance into the village. He found Susan and gave her a hug, not noticing the flash from Bozo's camera. Delighted as she was to see her boyfriend, after a few seconds, she gently pushed him away and cast a freshening charm on him. When she had put her wand away, she grabbed him and gave him a gentle kiss.

Flash!

Before they could break apart, Rita was upon them.

Flash.

“Good afternoon, Harry. It's a wonderful afternoon to find young love, wouldn't you agree? Of course. Miss Bones, does your aunt approve of your relationship with the youngest champion? Of course. Excuse me, Mr. Moody. I'm interviewing these two right now. Harry, did were you surprised to find yourself in first place? Of course you were.”

Harry walked off, taking Susan with him into the pub. He made a point of closing the door behind him.

... --- ...

Junior had seen Potter and his girlfriend backed against the wall with that pesky reporter and saw his chance. He tapped the enchanted galleon to activate to the portkey timer, and limped the five steps to get to Potter. He slipped the coin, unnoticed, into Potter's trouser pocket as the persistent witch distracted him and hurried off to

Zonko's, so he could be seen by someone and have a plausible alibi, if needed.

Unfortunately, Harry was wearing his oldest trousers, and the pocket that Junior had selected to slip the portkey coin into was badly torn. The galleon fell down his trouser leg and rolled onto the ground.

... --- ...

Bozo, the photographer watched as Potter, along with some buxom teenager slipped out of his boss's grasp and dashed into the pub. Rita made a move to follow, but it was a lost cause. The pub was packed and the door closed behind Potter. It didn't matter - Bozo had enough photos to last for a week or two.

In a stroke of luck, Bozo saw a gold galleon on the ground. He set his bulky camera down, picked up the coin and placed it into his pocket. As he was reaching for his camera, the portkey activated, and he vanished.

... --- ...

Rita thought she saw a flash behind her and thought that Bozo may have taken another photograph. She turned around a few seconds later and saw his camera and bag on the ground. Thinking that he must have walked off somewhere to look for someone, she picked his equipment up and waited. After a few minutes, she scowled to herself. It wouldn't be the first time that he'd walked off of an assignment to pick up a bottle. She went back to the Daily Prophet building to finish her stories and get his film developed.

She had photos to match several stories and intended to have them written before dinner. Young love – So profitable.

... --- ...

Junior waited several minutes in Zonko's, making a point to talk with the shopkeeper, ostensibly to see how the business was and for keeping on top of the latest pranking material. In reality, he was

establishing an alibi and had made a point of commenting about the time and the clock on the shopkeeper's cluttered wall. He commented, "I'll see you next week, Alan. I'd better go and check up on the kids."

Zonko replied, "See ya around, Moody."

With that, Junior walked out the door and went across the street into the pub. Looking around, he couldn't see Potter or his girlfriend, and assumed that the plan had succeeded. He limped into the bar and purchased a fifth of cognac to savor while he waited for his master to call him.

... --- ...

Seconds after they had dashed into the Three Broomsticks, Susan called, "Come on, Harry. Let's go out the back way. She'll never find us." The strawberry blonde took hold of his hand as they snaked their way through the crowd in the narrow building, and a minute later, they closed the back door behind them.

"Where are we going?" asked Harry, delighted to be anywhere with his girlfriend.

"Let's go to the Hog's Head," replied Susan. I heard that Professor Dumbledore's older brother is the proprietor.

"He must be close to a thousand if he's the older brother," remarked Harry as they dashed down the street.

They laughed as they closed the door to the dingy pub behind them. To Harry's delight, she ordered two butterbeers, brought them back to the booth, slid in and snuggled beside him.

Two hours later, they would be done enjoying their butterbeers and semi-public groping, leaving a very amused Aberforth with a story to tell his brother, as they returned to the castle.

... --- ...

Four hundred miles away, Peter Pettigrew tended the campfire that his master had directed him to make to heat the water in the gigantic cauldron. They sat in silence as they waited to see if Crouch had been successful in slipping Potter the portkey galleon.

The potion, that would be used to restore his master back to full health, was expensive and time consuming to make and had to be used immediately after making, so they couldn't create it in advance and store it. As such, they decided to just heat the water in the giant cauldron and see if Potter appeared.

"Be ready to stun him immediately, Wormtail," directed the voice originating from the little body. "Do not let the boy escape." Minutes passed and Pettigrew occasionally tended the fire while they waited.

Suddenly, there was a flash and a figure appeared, prone on the ground.

"Stupefy."

"Stupefy."

Wormtail and Voldemort each cast stunners that hit the paunchy photographer. Pettigrew ran up to the form and pushed him over to have a look. He called, "Master, this isn't the Potter boy. He's the photographer for the Daily Prophet."

Riddle pondered the unfortunate turn of events as he sat on the ground, half wrapped in a blanket. He could think of no use for the unfortunate man, except as food for Nagini. He replied, "Search him, and take everything of value."

Pettigrew complied and found a handful of galleons, an unopened roll of film and an opened pint of Johnny Red. Using a vanishing charm, Voldemort removed the man's clothing, quartered him using a Diffindo hex, and called his familiar to enjoy a meal.

Exhausted by the effort and knowing that his nearly worthless servant didn't have the stomach to watch the snake feed, he called, "Bring me

back to my room now. Afterwards, come back to put out the fire and clean up anything that Nagini doesn't finish."

... --- ...

As the Hogwarts teens were considering their dates, real or merely fantasy, Minister Fudge wiped the sweat off of his brow. Confidence in the wizarding world had dropped immediately following the Quidditch World Cup, and rather than the post match boost to the economy that he'd been hoping for, there had been a sharp fall followed by a slump that never really went away. Apparently the stories that the Potter boy had been spreading about not entering the contest were making people nervous.

This affected him, in that the wizarding world was funded by a VAT tax on sales of merchandise from the wizarding merchants. Sales were below expectations, thus Ministry revenues were below expectations.

He briefly considered handing out IOUs, but concluded that it would be seen as the most ridiculous thing that he'd ever done. He either needed to raise taxes, or cut services for the next year or two. His only other option would be to transfer some expenses from the Ministry budget to the school, which always seemed to have enough gold to fund whatever pet projects Dumbledore had in mind.

He checked the "Rejected" box on the request that Amelia had submitted to replace the five aurors lost through attrition in the last year. She would have to work with what she had.

... --- ...

Fred and George were sitting by the fireplace after Alicia and Angelina had gone up to their dormitory to discuss some aspect of the Yule Ball when they saw Ron come into the room looking dazed and dejected assisted by Colin Creevey.

"Ronn timers looks like a train that's just run off the tracks," remarked Fred as Colin relayed how their deboner brother boldly had walked up

to the stunning Champion from Beauxbatons, attempted to kiss her, and asked her to accompany him to the Yule Ball before being blasted into a wall by the shaken up, young witch.

“True,” observed George, “But the train wreck in motion is about to run right off a bridge. Watch this.”

“You’d better find a bird to ask before all of the decent ones are taken,” commented Seamus.

Hermione looked at the young Irishman in disgust and was about to comment when Ron stated, “Hermione, you’re a girl. You’re not too bad. Would you like to...”

Whap!

Ron asked, “What the bloody hell was that all about? I was trying to do you a favor.”

Whap, whap

“Fine, sit by yourself, you crazy witch. No one else would bother asking you.”

If looks could kill (and in the wizarding world, you never could tell for sure) Ron would be six feet under. Every female in the common room glared at the gormless teen. Hermione snarled, “I wouldn’t go to the Yule Ball with you if you were the last male on the planet and the survival of the human species depended on it, you ignorant wanker. You are the most arrogant, least ambitious specimen of a male wizard that I’ve ever encountered.” She turned around, gathered up her books and marched up the stairs.

Ron attempted to defend himself, saying, “What? I was trying to do her a favor. No one else would invite her. She’s just a plain bookworm.”

The temperature in the room seemed to chill by another few degrees and there was silence. Finally Parvati shook her head and observed,

“Ron, you really are clueless. Hermione already has a date to the ball. She was one of the first witches to be asked.” She and Lavender shook their heads in disgust as they gathered up their parchments and followed their roommate up the stairs.

Ron shook his head and commented, “They’re lying.”

“They’re not,” replied Ginny, shaking her head at her brother’s complete lack of observation.

“What’re you on about?” snarled Ron to his sister. “You aren’t going either.”

“Am too. Dean asked me. I wrote Mum an hour ago. She’s sending me dress robes.”

Harry walked into the room, saw Ron standing there looking angry at the world, walked over to sit down by Fred and George and quietly asked, “What’s up?”

George replied, “Trainwreck over there succeeded in pissing off every girl in the house, all within about a minute. By lunch tomorrow, he won’t be able to get a date, even if he had a sack of gold in his trouser pocket.”

Harry wasn’t in much of a mood, either to defend his former friend, or pour petrol on the flames and shook his head without commenting. He watched the fire in silence and reflected on his favorite strawberry blonde.

... --- ...

Saturday 17 December

Harry and Susan held hands as they walked from shop to shop along the three streets of Hogsmeade. Due to the Yule Ball the next weekend, Headmaster Dumbledore announced an extra Hogsmeade visit. As a result, they decided to do their Christmas shopping a week early. They had left immediately after Harry had finished practicing



with Rufus and as they walked along the cobblestone streets, she asked, "Who are you getting gifts for?"

Harry replied, "Aside from you – Amelia, Connie, Anna, Rufus, Sirius, Remus, Hermione, Hannah, the twins, Neville and Professor Dumbledore." A second later, he added, "Oh, and something for Dobby and Smidgen."

Susan gave her boyfriend a sly smile and suggested, "Connie and Anna would probably like an autographed poster of you."

She didn't have to wait long before Harry sputtered, "I'm not Lockhart. That's so wrong, on so many levels..."

She silenced him by giving him a kiss on the cheek and asked, "Maybe, but they would like one." She frowned for a moment and asked, "How much gold did you bring?"

Harry replied, "A little more than a hundred galleons. Do you have enough?"

She suggested, "How about if you lend me twenty-five? I'll pay you back when we get home. Let's meet at Circe's Secret in an hour."

Harry quickly fished twenty-five galleons out of his bag and handed her the coins. He wasn't familiar with that shop and asked, "Where is it?"

Eyes, gleaming, Susan replied, "That's the new witch's wear shop next to Scrivenshaft's the next street over from The Three Broomsticks. Save five or ten galleons. You might see something there that you like. We'll finish up together."

Not catching the innuendo, Harry nodded and replied, "Okay." He wandered off, stopping from shop to shop. He bought Professor Dumbledore a pair of warm, wool sox, and pranking supplies for Fred and George. For Sirius, he had Colin reprint a dozen photos that he'd taken of Harry and his friends.

He took Susan's suggestion and bought small posters of the four champions that he would ask the others to autograph for Anna, Connie and Rufus. He thought they could hang them up at their offices and have a good laugh over them.

He found the perfect gift for Hermione at Azule's Gifts and Gimmicks. It was a set of charmed mirrors like Remus had mentioned that his dad and Sirius had used. He would have bought a set for himself and Sirius, except that the package clearly indicated that they had a maximum range of 500 miles. He knew that it was about 450 miles from Inverness, which was the closest big city to Hogwarts, to London, so he hoped that they would work. He would have gotten the same for Amelia, except he estimated that their home in Welshpool was about a hundred miles out of range. On a whim, he bought an extra set. He thought that he might like to use them with Susan sometime.

He bought two wrist wandholders, thinking that he'd give one each to Neville and Hannah. They had begun dating and the four of them along with Hermione had been spending a lot of time together the last few months. On another whim, he bought an extra one, in case Ron had a complete change of personality.

He also found knit woolen scarves in Gryffindor colors for Amelia and Susan that he thought they would enjoy. While pondering what else to buy, he ran into Hermione and Hannah. Seeing the packages that they were carrying he asked, "How's shopping?"

Hermione replied, "We're about done. How about you?"

Harry replied, "Pretty good this year. I'm just about to meet Susan at Circe's Witches Wear."

Hermione bit her lip for a moment and quietly inquired, "Harry, have you ever been there before?"

"Nope," he replied. "Before this morning, I'd never even heard of it." He failed to notice Hannah sniggering behind Hermione.

Harry's friend considered her words for a moment and suggested, "Well... they, um, mostly have women's underwear, soaps and, um

personal things. Perhaps we should go with you.” Hannah was nearly rolling on the street with laughter.

Harry considered her offer for a moment, found his Gryffindor courage and replied, “I handle, er, I’ll manage. Thanks.”

Giving Hannah a McGonagall worthy glare, Hermione walked over to Harry and whispered a suggestion and some advice in his ear for nearly a minute. He was unquestionably the bravest man that she’d ever met, but she was fairly certain that the thought of C cups and undersized knickers would turn him into quivering mush in seconds. When she was done, she announced, “We’ll be at The Tree Broomsticks for an hour if you two get done early.” She nodded encouragingly and mouthed, “Good luck.”

... --- ...

Sunday 18 December

Junior noticed an interesting article in the paper as they were having breakfast.

Daily Prophet Managing Director Barnabus Cuffe announced that he is accepting applications for the position of photographer. Cuffe remarked, “This is a full time replacement position. Our previous photographer Bozo O’Riley walked off the job a week ago and was terminated last night.

“Interesting choice of words,” he muttered to himself. “Now if I could just get rid of this blasted headache.”

He had been disappointed that the blasted kid somehow wormed his way out of the kidnapping plot from the week before. Even though he’d offered to try it again, his Master had told him not to that might ruin the other plan.

... --- ...

Thursday 22 December

The two witches ate their sandwiches and crisps together in companionable silence, as they had hundreds of times over the years. Connie asked, "What would the kids like for Christmas, this year?"

Amelia thought for a moment and replied, "Susie would like a camera. Harry could use new trainers in size nine. He's growing like a weed now."

Connie smiled and Amelia added, "I need to tell you something. This will be his first Christmas, well I mean his first proper Christmas..."

Connie could hardly believe the implication. "Are you telling me that those small-minded lumps never even gave a little boy a decent..." Words escaped her, she was so angry. "They're sad excuses for human beings."

Amelia nodded and replied, "That, they are."

Connie inquired, "What ever happened to that great lump?"

Amelia replied, "He'll stay in the holding cell. He'll get his day in court - in a year or so; unless his paperwork somehow gets misfiled again. I don't want to put Harry through that nightmare right now. His aunt filed for divorce and his cousin was expelled from that private boarding school that he'd been attending. The last I'd read, he was being held at a long-term juvenile detention facility, St. Brutus's Center for something or another."

Connie remarked, "Just as well. When are the kids coming home?"

Amelia replied, "I'm picking them up immediately after the Yule Ball concludes on Christmas Eve. Can you be over about three on Christmas Day?"

Connie nodded and replied, "I wouldn't miss it." She tossed her napkin in the bin and added, "Have a good afternoon."

Amelia replied, "You two be careful this afternoon. Do you even think that old orphanage site is a good lead for the locket?"

Connie shook her head and replied, "Anna doesn't think so, but either way, we'll find out. I'll let you know tonight."

... --- ...

Saturday 24 December

Auror Nymphadora Tonks, in the undercover persona of Susan Florman, Student Healer finished her dinner and inconspicuously made her way to a spot just inside of the Great Hall. She conjured a chair and cast a light notice-me-not charm on herself. The school assignment had been good for her, so far. True to her word, Poppy had taken the young auror under her wing and had given her many hours of healing training, but she hadn't seen any potential threats against Mr. Potter. She had been hit on by a few of the seventh year boys, but had gracefully diverted their interests back to the other students.

She was somewhat awestruck at the length that the staff had gone to in decorating the facility. In addition to the floating candles, there were dozens of large, colorful banners illustrating scenes from all three schools. In place of the usual house tables, there were dozens of smaller round tables that would each seat eight people. A photographer had been hired to take pictures of each of the couples. As she was taking the photos, copies were magically posted on the bulletin boards so everyone could see them.

She watched as the old headmaster stood and looked around at the tables of young couples and visitors, all dressed so nicely. He began his after dinner remarks. "Good evening. Again, I'd like to welcome the guests, visitors, volunteers and of course, the students to enjoy the remainder of this lovely evening. At this time, I would ask that you stand and move to the south end of the hall for just a minute."

Tonks watched as the students complied; witches taking their bags and headed to the end near her. Several students nodded at her when they realized how close they were to bumping into her. Dumbledore waved his wand and the round tables folded themselves up and rolled over to one corner. The platform for the performing

musicians assembled itself and was set up in seconds. The musical group, Screeching Pumpkins had been booked for the evening, and to everyone's surprise, they walked in carrying violins, a viola, a cello and a string base and sat down.

Dumbledore remarked, "At this time, the champions and their partners will open the ball with the first dance. Champions, if you are ready?"

Tonks watched as the quartet played the song that Harry and Susan had practiced. She looked comfortable in his arms and for being novice dancers, they moved well together as if they were comfortable together. After a few dances, she noticed that they left the dance floor. She watched them as they visited the Bulgarian Champion and his partner, Hermione Granger. The four of them walked into the courtyard that the professors had masterfully charmed and configured into a warmed, lovely garden, with numerous benches and semi-secluded spots for the young couples to "visit" with some degree of privacy.

Keeping a respectful distance from her Principle, Tonks smiled to herself, as she quietly walked through the garden. She silently cast a squeaky shoe hex on Snape, so the greasy snoop couldn't sneak up on any of the young couples. Eventually she had run across most of Harry's schoolmates. Neville and Hannah Abbott danced all of the dances together. The Weasley twins had paired up with two of the witches from the quidditch team and she found herself amused by their seamless back-and-forth banter. Their younger sister was having fun entertaining Dean Thomas, while Cho Chang and her partner, Cedric Diggory seemed to enjoy groping each other a bit.

Soon, too soon for many of the teens, it was midnight. Quite a few of the parents had gathered just inside the front doors to pick up their children for the Christmas holiday. By ten minutes after twelve, the Great Hall was empty and the students had either left for the next two weeks or had returned to their dormitories and would be leaving in the morning. Noting that Director Bones had collected Harry and Susan, Tonks walked back into the castle, chilled by the snow filled, crisp air. She would leave in the morning and be happy to spend the day with her parents.

... --- ...

Rita Skeeter could hardly believe her luck. First, she got wind of a budding romance between the headmistress of the famed French academy and Hagrid. If that wasn't enough, she heard Hagrid's first-hand confession that he was the son of the infamous giantess Fridwulfa.

It was too late for the Christmas edition, but this was a scoop that would keep for a few days. She left the enchanted garden to go plan her stories. Some days, being a beetle animagus had huge benefits.

... --- ...

After the remaining students had all returned to their rooms for the evening, Albus retired to his office. He locked the door and walked to the large cabinet, which held the stone basin carved with runes. He selected one of the crystal vials that were neatly arranged in a velvet-lined container that seemingly held several hundred vials. He examined the label, pulled off the stopper, and poured the contents of the vial into his stone basin.

The memory of the confrontation between Senior Auror Bob Ogden and Marvolo Gaunt was one that the old professor had examined many times. It was made in 1926, at most two years before Merope gave birth to Tom. Albus never did find out what Marvolo's son Morfin was hissing to Ogden.

In previous viewings, it had always been the locket that the daughter was wearing and the ring that Marvolo waved under Ogden's face that had held his interest. This time, he focused not on the people - rather the location. A sign in the distance on the road pointed to Little Hangleton. After getting out of the pensieve, Dumbledore wrote the name of the village on a slip of paper and placed it into his pocket. He then carefully withdrew the silver strand and placed it back into the vial before retiring for the night.

... --- ...

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McGonagall's eyes flashed when the old scribe shuffled into her office. "Mr. Crow, there has been a complaint." One of the subscribers had suggested that he go and find another profession. Personally, she wondered about the goblet of potion that he always seemed to be nursing. She was unfamiliar with the potion, white lightning. She wasn't certain exactly what it was intended to cure. Perhaps it was one of those new energy drinks that she'd read about.

Paying her no mind, Crow dropped off his report and returned to his steel horse, intent on one last ride before the weather failed him. As he rode off he thought of the RuneMaster report that he'd written and recalled the number 5077573. The afternoon sunshine was warm on his shoulder as the miles rolled by.

... --- ...



## Chapter Thirteen

### Christmas Scenes

Sunday 25 December

Harry awoke early on Christmas Day, as was his habit. He brushed his teeth, walked out of his bedroom and quietly made his way down the hallway, so as not to wake anyone up who was still sleeping.

Susan's door was open an inch or two and Harry instinctively glanced in. She was standing in front of her mirror brushing her shoulder length strawberry blonde hair. It took Harry a second to catch her reflection in the mirror, and in that moment, he realized that she was wearing a pair of the black knickers that they'd bought the week before. She was wearing only that pair of black silk knickers! The young teen found himself unable to look away. In his eyes, she was very beautiful.

Susan noticed the gurgling noise outside her door and made eye contact with the wide-eyed reflection of Harry that she could see in her mirror. She smiled at him and in a soft voice said, "Happy Christmas, Harry. I'll be down in a minute."

Harry gulped an apology of some sort, turned and somehow managed not to fall down the stairs. Amelia was seated at the table reading one of several newspapers lying on the table and greeted the teen. "Happy Christmas, Harry. Did you happen to notice if Susan was up yet?"

If possible, his face went redder than it was and he replied, "I, er, saw her. She should be down in a minute."

She handed him a plate with toast and bacon, then asked, "Grapefruit or melon?"

He resisted the urge to choke and gurgled, "Either one."

Just then, Susan zoomed down the stairs and into the kitchen. Dressed in a pale blue sweater and jeans, she hugged Amelia then

hugged Harry from behind as he sat on the bench seat. She greeted them, "Happy Christmas. Who's coming over this year?"

Amelia replied, "Becky, Ben and Hannah are supposed to stop by at ten. They're spending the afternoon with Becky's sister. Connie is coming for dinner. If you like, we can pop over to the Granger's for a few minutes after lunch."

The two teens nodded and Susan replied, "That would be brilliant, Auntie."

... --- ...

A prudent Auror arranges for backup assistance before entering an unfamiliar location that is almost certainly dangerous. Even their Muggle counterparts, who arguably had superior forms of instant communication would follow the same procedure. Most law enforcement agencies do not follow the old Texas Rangers slogan – One riot, one Ranger.

But Albus Dumbledore had left the previous month's meeting with Amelia, Harry, the two Investigators and the Senior Auror with mixed feelings. Certainly, he was pleased with the progress that they had made in finding and destroying the cup. Yet a part of him – just a small part - was slightly ruffled that he'd essentially come up empty-handed after years of research, whereas they'd come so far, so very quickly.

It had not been difficult locating the villages of Little and Greater Hangleton after he began searching for them by name. A few minutes in the library gave him the information that he'd needed. Thus, while Harry and the others were exchanging Christmas greetings, the ancient wizard was floating two hundred feet in the air, disillusioned, riding on an old Comet 60 broom, looking down through the bushes. As the search continued, the windchill and damp air completely numbed Dumbledore. Traversing the countryside like cornrows, the old wizard flew back and forth. It would have come as a shock to both him and his nemesis that for a few moments, they had been within the length of a Quidditch pitch from each other. A half-mile south of

the old Riddle mansion, the old professor saw what he was looking for.

At the bottom of the hill, largely hidden by hedgerows, trees and an overgrowth of brush, stood the remains of a dilapidated shack. The path leading up to it was almost completely grown over, indicating that it hadn't seen daily use for many years.

There was an inch or so of heavy, wet snow on the ground, untrampled for as far as he could see. He floated lower to the ground and extended his senses, searching for trace levels of magic. Eventually, he could feel dark magic originating from the shack. He floated carefully around the old shack, attempting to sense any wards or traps. He didn't find any, but objectively, his senses had been somewhat numbed from the cold air.

The old professor briefly considered returning with assistance, either from Filius or Severus, but elected not to. He decided to just land and have a quick look, rationalizing that he could always change his mind. Albus walked the handful of steps from the spot where he landed to the front door. The snake that he had seen in Ogden's pensieve memory had long since disintegrated into dust, but the nail that had held it was still embedded into the door.

His attention wavered for a moment as he considered that Morfin and his father Marvolo had been arrested in the summer of 1924 and Merope had delivered Tom late in 1926. He wondered if living alone in this hovel would have been an improvement or yet another burden on a young witch with no education or skills.

He stood absolutely still in the dim light. He let his magic reach out and sense the dark magic that was hidden beneath the center planks of the worn, wooden floor. He carefully took a few small steps and reached the center of the room. For many minutes he stared at the six inch wide, worn rough-cut planks that covered the floor. He noticed that most had been nailed to the floor joists, but one wasn't properly fastened. He drew his wand and carefully levitated the board before setting it down a few feet away.

... --- ...

A qualified cursebreaker, like Ron Weasley's oldest brother Bill, would have immediately noticed the weak compulsion charm that had been activated by the use of a spell in the immediate vicinity.

A qualified cursebreaker would have considered the weak compulsion charm to be a gigantic red flag and probably backed away for a while to observe what happened next. More likely he would have consulted with one of his co-workers to get another perspective.

... --- ...

Unfortunately, Albus Dumbledore, while a brilliant wizard, wasn't a professional cursebreaker. Where Bill would have stepped back and observed, Albus stepped ahead. He carefully brushed away the loose dirt and laid his eyes on the golden ring with the flat, black stone.

Using the tip of his wand, he lifted the ring from its hiding place and examined it. Without a doubt, it was oozing dark magic. Carefully he placed the ring into the pocket of his traveling robe without touching it. He replaced the floorboard. Satisfied that it was back in place, he walked out of the door, took his wand out of his pocket, and picked up his broom.

Dumbledore got on the broom and using his wand, repaired the snow on the ground to erase the tracks that he'd previously made. He put his wand back into his pocket and flew toward the edge of the village. When he had gone a mile, he landed. It was at that point that he unconsciously succumbed to the compulsion charm and slipped the ring onto his finger before apparating to the edge of the Hogwarts ground.

As he began his apparation, the curse on the ring fully activated from the magic, releasing a poison that entered into his system through the thin skin of his finger. By the time that the old headmaster realized that something was very wrong, it was too late. He dashed to the door of the castle and shouted for Severus.

Dumbledore wasn't able to immediately find the potions master, so he ran to his office where he picked up the Gryffindor sword that Harry had used to slay the basilisk, and with a focused swing, sliced through the ring. Satisfied that he'd at least completed his task, he used the Floo to find Severus, who arrived within seconds.

Snape carefully examined the brown flecks, which were still stuck to the inside of the ring. Whereas Dumbledore had assumed that they were simply dirt flakes, Snape recognized them as the dried bits of a sophisticated, magically-activated, skin absorbed poison. He dashed to his office where he grabbed a bezoar and several universal antidotes that he had on hand. The potions master, who owed his very life to the old wizard, ran as he had never run in his life. He forced the antidote down the old man's throat followed by the bezoar.

Dumbledore regained full consciousness and helped Snape contain most of the poison within the old headmaster's left arm. "Hold still, Headmaster," commanded Snape as he helped Dumbledore to the hospital wing.

Poppy heard someone coming and walked out of her office to investigate. Seeing the two wizards come through the door, she called, "Happy Christmas," before she noticed that Dumbledore was barely conscious, looked gray and was drenched in sweat. She cried, "Good Lord, Severus. What's wrong?"

Unexpectedly, Dumbledore answered for himself and replied, "Happy Christmas to you too, Poppy. I have accidentally absorbed a very deadly poison. Severus has helped me contain it in my left arm and while it will surely destroy my limb, it is currently in a stasis."

Snape and Pomfrey both drew their wands and ran diagnostic charms up and down Dumbledore's hard, wrist, arm and shoulder. He looked at the potions master and the master healer and asked, "How high up?"

Snape replied, "Just below the shoulder," whereas Poppy pointed to his mid-bicep so a replacement could be fitted. Inexplicably, the old headmaster deferred to Poppy's advice and lay down on her table to begin the procedure to have his left arm removed.

... --- ...

Tom Riddle and Wormtail were eating a late breakfast, as was their custom. Riddle had always been a night owl, and frequently didn't go to sleep until four in the morning. What passed as companionship between the weak wizard and the weakened wizard centered, strangely enough, on the Daily Prophet. Riddle was a reader and due to the small size of his weak arms, he couldn't hold the paper open. As such, he allowed himself the indignity of sitting on Wormtail's lap, wrapped in a small flannel blanket, while they read the paper together.

At the moment that the old headmaster struck Peverell's ring, miles away, the small form that Riddle had taken flopped off of Pettigrew's lap in a spasm of incredible, intense, pain.

Entangled by the blanket, he didn't fall onto the floor, so much as he was unrolled from the blanket and landed against the table leg with a thud.

"Master!" whimpered, Wormtail, thinking that he'd accidentally done something that would either end his own life, or find himself in pain for at least a month.

Riddle let off a burst of accidental magic that, a dozen years ago, would have leveled a small house. Instead, it threw Pettigrew twenty feet against the wall of the spacious dining room knocking the round wizard unconscious.

... --- ...

Miles away, in Welshpool, Harry flopped off of his chair and rolled onto the floor in his own version of agony. The glass that was in his hand fell to the floor and shattered on the slate. Susan saw his scar pulsing, an ugly shade of crimson, and had an idea. She scooped the teen in her arms, hugged him for everything that she was worth and gave his scar dozens of small, loving, kisses.

Within five minutes, Harry's mind felt a bit clearer, certainly better for all of the loving attention that he was receiving. Amelia, who'd left for a moment to firecall for a mediwitch returned and saw Harry open his eyes. She noticed the focus of his gaze and suggested, "Susie, maybe you should let go of Harry, just a bit, and let him sit. He probably needs a bit of air."

She smiled to herself at the pout on her niece's face, not unlike one from a child who was told to not squeeze a puppy so hard and forced to set it back on the floor. She waved her wand around the floor and repaired the glass before cleaning the spill, so no one would get cut.

Sandy, the mediwitch was there a minute later. She came through the fireplace and called, "Amelia?"

The gray haired administrator wasn't embarrassed to have called her mediwitch friend in, even if by the time that she had arrived, it had become apparent that Harry had shown remarkable improvement.

Stepping into the kitchen, Sandy inquired, "What's wrong?"

Bones replied, "Harry was eating breakfast and suddenly had some sort of seizure. He..." She paused and thought about what Susie had told her when Hufflepuff's cup had been destroyed.

She caught herself thinking out loud and was relieved that Sandy had been focused on Harry. Sandy inquired, "I'm sorry, Amelia, what were you saying?"

"Nothing." She thought to herself, 'It had to be that. Either that, or he reacquired one.' Horcruxes were not a subject that she was willing to discuss on a wider basis than she needed to. Instead, she told Sandy, "If you could just give him a quick look-over, I'd be grateful. Be sure to bill my department for the call."

With a disappointed tone, the mediwitch asked, "Joe Bloggs again?"

“Unfortunately.” Turning to her son she replied, “But in all fairness, Harry, this is my friend, and all-too frequent lifesaver, Sandy Page. Sandy, this is my son, Harry Potter.”

Harry held out his hand and greeted her, “Happy Christmas, Ma’am.” I’m sorry to interrupt your holiday.” His smile was disarming.

The normally stoic mediwitch stammered, “No worries. Happy Christmas to you too, Mr. Potter.” After an uncomfortable silence, she finally asked, “So what seems to be the problem?”

Harry replied, “I had a blinding flash of pain by my scar. It lasted for about...” He looked at Susan for confirmation and continued, “Five minutes?”

She nodded.

The blonde mediwitch waved her wand over the teen and cast a few diagnostic charms across his face and upper chest. There was something that she didn’t like around his scar, but she couldn’t immediately identify it.

Harry didn’t want to miss his first real Christmas and pleaded, “I’m fine. Actually, somehow I feel better than I did yesterday.”

Sandy looked at Amelia, gave her a wink and suggested, “I wouldn’t mind some company at St. Mungo’s today. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to go in to get checked...”

“No! He’s staying here,” shouted Susan, who suddenly realized that the mediwitch was having them on and turned red in her face.

Amelia saw the frown on her friend’s face and asked, “What is it, Sandy?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say that Harry just had a block of some type removed, but these sorts of thing don’t “just happen.” Perhaps you should stop by sometime next week.”



Amelia remarked, "Joe Bloggs will be in to see you Tuesday at eight if that will work?"

Sandy pulled a small piece of parchment from her pocket, tapped her wand to it and replied, "How about half eight?"

They agreed on the time and wished the mediwitch a "Happy Christmas." A moment later, she used the Floo to get back to St. Mungo's.

After asking Harry again if he was okay, Amelia gave him a hug and excused herself to make a few telephone calls. Within five minutes she had contacted Rufus, Connie and Anna. None of them had any recent contact with horcruxes, nor had they come across any promising leads in the last two days.

She went back into the family room where Harry and Susie were sitting together discussing the ball. She asked, "Did you both have fun at the dance?"

Harry immediately replied, "Quite a bit, thanks."

Susan made eye contact with her aunt, glanced at Harry, smiled and added, "A lot of the other witches had gone pretty much over the top with their formal robes. Some were past the edge."

Amelia understood the teen's unstated message about overexposure and inquired, "What did you think, Harry?"

Harry replied, "Susan's and Hermione's dresses were both very nice. I really didn't notice anyone else in particular."

Amelia noticed the smile on Susie's face as he answered and thought to herself, 'Good answer, Son.'

Just before ten, Amelia heard Poppy Pomfrey call through the fireplace, "Amelia, can you come out to the castle for a few minutes? Headmaster Dumbledore..." She paused when she noticed Susan and Harry in the room and finished, "Just for a few minutes?"

Bones gave a strange look to the Master Healer and replied, "I'll be right over." She looked at the teens and mentioned, "I don't expect to be long. If the Abbotts get here before I get back, be certain that Smidgen gets them a beverage." She leaned over and gave the teens each a hug and added, "I'll be right back."

... --- ...

Junior awoke, comfortable in his normal form. Relieved of the need to be Mad-Eye for a moment, he nonetheless positioned his Polyjuice, artificial eye, and peg leg near the shower of his staff quarters. Not only did he hate the peg leg and its awkwardness, he loathed every second he had to wear that damnable magic eye. What he could see with it was a wonder, all right, but so were the headaches it gave him. He didn't realize that any competent eye healer could have given him a minor adjustment that would have eliminated the headaches, so he just took it off at every possible opportunity.

In keeping with Mad-Eye's legendary paranoia, he had previously demanded that Dumbledore disable Floo travel into his fireplace and limit it to only firecalls. He had also placed a screen in the line of sight from the fireplace to the hall leading back to the bedroom and loo. He had made it a habit to always hop on one leg when unPolyjuiced. Given Moody's social skills - or lack thereof - he figured that few knew of Moody's personal habits concerning the peg leg. He could readily explain that his stump itched so he took the leg off in his apartment. What he couldn't explain would be two normal footfalls should a firecall come in while he was distracted.

His preparations complete, Junior entered the shower for half an hour of steamy luxury. Still, it ended all too soon. He had one of the worst of his chores before him; all the worse because the end was not yet in sight: He had to go feed and clean Moody.

He still needed Moody's hair, and for that he needed the old Auror alive. While Polyjuice could still give him Moody's appearance if Moody died, its potency was badly degraded by the death of the donor. Junior was already sick of having to drink the revolting concoction every hour or so and the thought of having to drink it every few minutes was unbearable. Besides, he was brewing as

much as he could already; if Moody died, he'd have to abandon his mission or ask the Dark Lord for assistance in brewing the potions. Both options were unthinkable.

Grumbling enough to do the real Alastor proud, Junior got as dressed as he could in his normal body, and then gagged down another swig of the noxious brew. As the painful transformation completed, he sighed and reached for the peg leg and the accursed eye. He muttered to himself, "At least I don't have to wear the damned thing while I'm feeding the bastard."

... --- ...

A few hours later, Alastor Moody heard the lid to his magical trunk open. He'd been a prisoner in his own trunk for months now. Nearly always in the dark and barely fed, he looked up and was nearly blinded by the light. The seventh compartment of his trunk was a magically expanded twelve by twelve by twelve-foot room. A metal ladder bolted onto the wall was used for entrance and exit. Originally intended as an extra storage compartment, Moody had used it twice in the past to illegally detain prisoners for questioning for a few days at a time. Never in his darkest dreams had the old Auror imagined that he would be a prisoner in his own trunk.

The old Auror was surprised when the food bucket was lowered. Instead of the usual sandwich and goblet of pumpkin juice, there were two sandwiches and a bottle of brandy. Also, there was a sprig of a branch from a pine tree. Moody looked into the bucket, quickly took the contents out, and tied the cord of the waste pail to the rope.

Unable to resist, the old Auror croaked in a voice that was increasingly unused to talking, "What, you going soft or something?"

As he pulled the pails back up, Junior replied, "Happy Christmas, Moody. It's the last one you'll live to see."

... --- ...

Back at Welshpool, after dinner had been served and the Christmas gifts opened, the teenagers had gone off to examine their new treasures. Connie asked, "So what happened?"

In a low voice, Amelia related the story from the hospital wing, including Riddle's deadly trap.

Connie shook her head at the senseless tragedy and observed, "What a prideful, arrogant man. What was he thinking?"

Amelia replied, "Obviously he wasn't at that moment. He did convey his hope that I would reach his age someday and have as few regrets."

Connie asked, "Not to be completely cold about his injury, but is he certain that he destroyed the horcrux?"

Amelia nodded and held out a box that contained the ring. The bottom had been split in two. She observed, "Harry had a severe pain in his forehead this morning just about the time that the Professor split the ring. Not to doubt him, but I'd sleep better if you would cast your detection charms to verify it." Before she handed Connie the box, she added, "Be careful with it. Snape claims that he removed all of the poisons from the band, but it makes no sense to take a needless risk."

Connie conjured and put on a pair of surgical gloves, then picked up the broken ring and examined it. She cast the detection charm, but wasn't completely happy with the result. There was something there, but she wasn't certain what it was. She replied, "Let's take it outside and burn it. Why take a chance that it still contains a fourth of that monster's soul?"

She put the ring back in the box and they went outside to the stone barbecue pit. Connie cast the Fiendfyre charm, while Amelia kept a close eye to be certain that the fire didn't spread. Fifteen minutes later the fire had cooled down and the ring had melted. As they walked back into the house, Connie asked, "How long will Dumbledore be in the hospital wing?"

“Not more than a few days. Poppy and Snape removed his arm that they said contained most of the poison. Even so, Snape stated that there is no antidote and that it will eventually prove to be fatal.”

A bit embarrassed by her previous words, Connie exclaimed, “Good Lord! I had no idea. How long does he have?”

Amelia grimly replied, “Perhaps as short as a few months or maybe as much as a year. No one really knows.”

The senior investigator blanched. It was a sobering reminder that they weren’t simply out on some treasure hunt. She asked, “Are you going to say anything to the kids?”

Amelia shook her head and replied, “Not unless they specifically ask. It’s Dumbledore’s story to tell, and I’m certain that he’ll concoct some tale.”

... --- ...

A few minutes later, Harry accepted the envelope and the small package from the brightly colored bird that had tapped on their window while Connie and Amelia looked on with amazement. Susan made eye contact with her aunt and pointedly looked over at Connie. Amelia nodded and asked Connie to help her with the afters for a minute.

Susan scooted over to her boyfriend and inquired, “What did he say?”

Harry opened the letter and read,

Harry,

Bangkok was amazing. I took a tuk tuk to Patpong, and then visited the Kwai river memorial. It was a sobering reminder of the horrors of enslavement.

Happy Christmas.

Uncle Sylvester

The pair looked at each other and shrugged. Neither of the teens had a clue what he was writing about. Harry tapped the letter. Not only was there writing on the back page like the previous messages, but a second, smaller, lumpy envelope appeared. He looked at it and saw that it was addressed to Amelia Bones. They read the rest of the letter together.

Harry (and if I'm correct, Susan too)

Happy Christmas, Harry. You too, Susan. After that bit of unpleasantness in Cypress, I took your advice and returned to Madrid. Until Pettigrew is found and Fudge leaves office, I really can't return. He's too easily corrupted and has too much to lose if I were to be found innocent. I'm sorry that I won't get to see you both over the holidays.

Harry, I miss you every day, but that's nothing new. However, I did find something useful for you for a Christmas gift. I know it's not much, but please keep it with you always.

I've also enclosed an envelope for Amelia to look at. It contains a pensieve memory. Please don't pester her too much about it.

Susan, please do your best to keep Harry happy. I know that he must feel that he has the weight of the world on his shoulders between that blasted tournament and that Bat's prophecy.

Happy Christmas.

Love,

Sirius

Harry saw the tears welling in Susan's eyes as he carefully placed the letter back in the envelope. As gently as he could, he hugged her, only to be nearly crushed by her returned embrace. They held each other for a few minutes as they each silently struggled to hold back their tears.

Amelia and Connie came back into the room and saw the two teens let go of each other; Susan's eyes still glistening with unshed tears. She handed Harry the small package and gave her auntie the lumpy envelope. Amelia held it and suggested, "Perhaps you should open your gift, Harry."

He unwrapped the paper and looked at what could only be described as the wizarding version of a Swiss Army knife. In addition to a small blade, cork screw and bottle opener, there were a dozen little metal pins of various colors that looked a bit like hex keys. He looked at the instructions and realized that they held various charms like shrinking or enlarging an object. It was the perfect circumvention of the underage restriction on magic!

Amelia saw the smile on the teen's face and asked, "What did you get?"

Harry replied, "A magical pocket knife."

She smiled and replied, "Susie's dad had one of those when he was growing up. He loved it."

Connie asked, "What did you get?"

Amelia opened the envelope and carefully read the letter. She excused herself and went to get a pensieve. Two minutes later, she returned and set the dish on the kitchen table. As the others gathered around, she announced, "Harry, Sirius sent me a memory and asked that I take a look at it. We'll talk about it when I come back out. Okay?"

He nodded and she put the tip of her nose in the dish and disappeared.

... --- ...

Amelia found herself in the living room of the cottage where James and Lily were staying at Godric's Hollow. She watched in fascinated horror as James, Lily, Sirius and Peter Pettigrew discussed the

Fidelius charm, back and forth. She felt her heart break as Sirius convinced James that no one would suspect Peter of being their secret keeper. She felt tears running down her cheeks a minute later, when Lily cast the charm and gave Pettigrew the secret. Lily hugged Pettigrew and Black as they got ready to leave while James held baby Harry. Her last words to them were, "We'll have you two and Remus out for dinner next week after Halloween. Thank you both so very much. We love you."

With that, Sirius walked out their door with Pettigrew and the memory ended. She stepped out of the memory and tapped her wand on the bottom of the note as she'd been instructed. Words appeared on the back half of the note.

Director Bones,

The memory that you just watched was the last time that I saw James and Lily alive. I swear on my magic that it hasn't been altered. I will regret my insistence that they use that rat until my dying day. Harry has written me and on multiple occasions mentioned the outstanding job that you have done in providing a loving home for him. For that, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I'm living a quiet life in Madrid. I was nearly apprehended in Cypress a few weeks ago by British Aurors. My belief is that they were sent (illegally) by Fudge at the recommendation of Lucius Malfoy. I don't know their names, but if you wish, I'll send a memory the next time that I send a letter to Harry.

His owl knows how to contact me. Please do what you can to keep him safe without walling him in. I'm certain that Harry's destiny is to destroy Voldemort and I'm equally certain that he's out there somewhere.

Your humble servant,

Sirius Orion Black

Amelia thought for a moment and announced, "Connie, I'm going to leave this note on the table for a few minutes while I take Harry and Susie upstairs to talk with them." She gave her friend a meaningful



look and took the teens up to Harry's room and closed the door. She directed, "Have a seat, you two."

Susan asked, "What did he say?"

She replied, "In short he asked that I continue to provide Harry a loving home. He said that until Pettigrew is captured and Fudge gets sacked, he'd stay away and probably stay in Madrid." She added, "The memory that he showed me was of your parents selecting Pettigrew as their secret keeper at Sirius's recommendation. It was the last time that he saw them. He recommended that I not show it to you, but I would leave that decision up to you. In that context, it's a fairly disturbing scene, but I know you don't have many memories of your parents. Either way, you don't need to see it tonight. I'll save it and you can decide later."

Susie asked, "Why did you leave Connie downstairs?"

Her aunt replied, "Plausible deniability. Do her a favor and don't bring Sirius up in any conversation. Regardless of what you believe, he's still a wanted man. Can you both do that for her?"

The teens nodded and she added, "Good. Now let's go have some afters."

... --- ...

Monday 26 December

The snow was falling in heavy, wet, galleon-sized flakes when the teens got up on Monday morning. Amelia greeted Harry warmly and asked, "What are your plans for the day?"

Harry replied, "Rufus suggested that I spend a few hours each day practicing swimming. If it's not too much trouble, I was wondering if you might warm the pool up a bit?"

Amelia smiled at her son and replied, "Certainly. I'll go out and tidy it up a bit it. Can you get Susie something to eat when she comes down?"

He quickly agreed. A few minutes later, Susan made her way into the kitchen and plopped down at the nearest spot. She wasn't a morning person.

"Morning," greeted Harry, in a cheerful voice.

She had a few sips of coffee and a slice of toast. When she was finished with the toast and had another gulp of coffee, she smiled back at him and replied, "Good morning to you too. Did you sleep okay?"

Harry nodded and replied, "I dreamed about Sirius. I really only met him that one time and he looked pretty ragged. I hope he's lots better now."

She didn't say anything; rather she touched his hand and looked into his eyes. She could see the sadness, but didn't know how to make it go away. Instead, she asked, "What do you want to do today?"

He replied, "Rufus wants me to spend a few hours in the pool, kicking and doing arm work."

Susan looked doubtful and replied, "That sounds like a good way to catch a dreadful chill." She was of a mind to read a little book that Hermione had given her

He shook his head and countered, "Amelia went out to put a warming charm on the pool."

Her eyes lit up and she suggested, "We could invite Hannah, Neville and Hermione over for a winter swim."

Harry looked cautious and replied, "Maybe we should ask first."

Amelia had just stepped back in and caught the last few words and inquired, "Ask what, Dear?"

Susie jumped in, "Would it be all right if we invited Neville, Hannah and Hermione over for lunch and a swim?"

"Certainly. Can Hermione take the Knight Bus? I'll be at the office until six. Otherwise, I'd go pick her up."

Harry replied, "I'm sure that would be fine. I'll go get my practice in now before they get here."

Susan added, "Thanks, Auntie."

Amelia considered the situation for a minute and said, "I'll get you both ten-day conditional magic permits from Malfalda." Hopkirk had been somewhat easier to work with since their confrontation the previous July. She added, "Rufus mentioned wanting to come over sometime tomorrow. What are your plans?"

Harry looked at Susan for a moment and replied, "Nothing for certain at this time. I'll be happy to work around his schedule. We have some schoolwork reports to do, but only about a day's worth. Susan?"

"I wanted to go to Diagon Alley sometime this week, but any day would be fine."

Amelia nodded and replied, "Okay. Let Smidgen know if you are having guests over for lunch so she knows how much to make. I'll see you both tonight at six."

"Bye Auntie. Love you."

As Amelia stepped into the fireplace to take the Floo to work she heard Susan command, "Get your suit on, Aqua-Man."

... --- ...

Tuesday 27 December

Albus awoke on Tuesday morning. Instinctively he attempted to scratch his nose and recalled that it wasn't going to happen as it had for the last one hundred and thirty four years. He had lost his arm and most of his remaining life two days before in his effort to rid the world of Tom's horcrux. He could second-guess himself for the remainder of his shortened life, but it would serve no purpose.

He tried to recall his painkiller-loaded conversation with Amelia. Mostly it was a haze, except he recalled her promise to go collect Peverell's ring from the top of his desk in his office and destroy it.

Poppy noticed that he was awake and he saw her frown at him as she walked over. "Good morning, Poppy."

Pomfrey wanted to berate the headmaster for what he had done to himself. She wanted to slap him silly for taking such a foolish risk. She wanted to cry that the British wizarding world's unofficial leader was mortally wounded, and would soon leave them. Instead, she looked him in the eye and inquired, "Can I get you anything?"

Dumbledore considered her question for a moment and inquired, "Would it be possible for me to return to my own quarters after you have finished your examination? There is much to do and increasingly less time to complete what must be done."

Pomfrey couldn't see a benefit in holding him against his will. The stump of his arm had been magically healed. She nodded and said, "Against my better judgment, I will not hold you against your will. Are you interested in arranging an artificial limb fitting?"

Fighting his lifelong habit, the old professor itched his nose with his right hand and replied, "No, Poppy that won't be necessary. However, I must ask you to stick to the story that I was hit by an automobile in London on Christmas morning and lost my arm as a result of a tragic accident. It is imperative that no other version or tale is related to anyone. Can I count on your keeping this most important confidence?"

Reluctantly the old Master Healer nodded and asked, "Will you ask the same of Severus and Amelia?"

Dumbledore nodded and replied, "Yes. I shall speak with each of them within the hour. He added, "I'm aware that I shall eventually fall victim of the poison still in my system, probably much sooner than I would wish. Again, that is information that cannot leave this room."

She concluded her examination a few minutes later and recorded his condition on a parchment and marked it 100 percent - 27 December. She would use it as a starting point to track his deterioration. After she reluctantly sent him on his way, she filed the document in her folder and locked her drawer before going to the Great Hall for breakfast.

As Dumbledore walked the comparatively short distance to his office, his well-organized mind considered the hundred things that he needed to accomplish before his allotted time was up.

... --- ...

As they sat in Director Bones' private conference room, Anna asked, "So destroying horcruxes aside, "What can we do to weaken Riddle?"

Scrimgeour observed, "His arsenal consists of magical power and skill in his own right, plus his followers, fear, and his supposed social platform."

Connie suggested, "Go on."

Scrimgeour continued, "Destroying his horcruxes weakens him personally, at least with respect to stamina. His helpers provide gold, manpower and influence. The Prophet does as much as anything to spread fear. Finally his 'Pureblood traditions' message gives him a face of legitimacy."

Amelia added, "The details of Riddle's actual heritage could be released. It would be a stronger message if some longstanding pureblood family like the Greengrasses or Longbottoms were interviewed and made statements to the effect that they believe in upholding wizarding traditions but they have no desire to exclude or harm firstborns or nonmagicals."

Anna added, "They could slant it along the line of, 'If you believe in the old-line pureblood values, why follow the bastard son of a Muggle who abandoned the pregnant mother of his child? It's a bit crude, but hard to ignore.'"

Scrimgeour shook his head. "Wrong message. We would be better saying, 'Power and position are earned, that there's room within the wizarding world for anyone who has the ability to prove themselves, and that each generation has the responsibility to live up to the achievements of their parents and to build on those and make their own mark in the world.' That recognizes the work that the old families accomplished and challenges their children to move ahead. It also offers space for the firstborn witches and wizards."

Connie considered his words for a minute and observed, "Well spoken, and you have the better message for the situation. If only we could get Fudge to step down, you could run for Minister on that platform."

Amelia nodded. Rufus had the ambition to lead and possibly be a man who wouldn't always have his hand out. She was honest with herself and knew that she would prefer to remain where she was. She liked her current position, found it quite satisfying, and beyond that, she felt that her two teenagers needed her. As much as she hated to admit it, should another war break out, the life expectancy of an effective Minister was quite short. She commented, "That really leaves us with two lynchpins – the locket horcrux and the Malfoys."

Scrimgeour coaxed, "Keep going."

Bones cleaned her monocle and added, "Should the locket be found and destroyed, I believe that it would be time to go public. The message would be, 'The Dark Lord isn't dead, but he's been irreversibly weakened. Tom Marvolo Riddle is no pureblood, and he's not worth following.'"

Scrimgeour commented, "It's a good plan, but we're in something of a footrace with Voldemort. If he regains his body before we destroy the horcrux, we've got another war on our hands. Fudge has frozen

headcount so we have three tasks – Training for a war with no extra gold, hunting for the horcruxes; all-the-while running our day-to-day business. Connie, do you have any new leads?”

She shook her head and replied, “We found nothing at the old orphanage. We could try the Forbidden Forest next.”

Amelia asked, “Where else?”

Anna interjected, “We’ve hit something of a brick wall in our search. We believe that the diary was given to Lucius without his knowledge of what it really was. We don’t have an estimate of when he received it. Without completely showing our cards, we can’t ask him. Gringotts wouldn’t have a record of when Bellatrix stored the cup. So, at least two of the horcruxes were given to his followers to hold on to. The ring that Professor Dumbledore found was hidden in a place that held significance to Riddle and was heavily booby-trapped. Let’s for sake of discussion say that he gave one to Rosier or one of his other inner-circle Death Eaters who were killed. It could be in the family vault or on someone’s fireplace mantle. Conducting those searches without anyone’s knowledge would be all but impossible, to say nothing of illegal. If he went with the significant places theme, it could be at Hogwarts, the Forbidden Forest, the first place that he felt up some girl, or at the bottom of Black Lake. I think we should consult with Professor Dumbledore while we’re still able to, and ask him what ideas he may have.”

Amelia nodded and offered, “He may have lost some of his arrogance since he found out that he’d given himself a death sentence.”

She paused for a moment to think and continued, “So, in conclusion, Connie and Anna – you two will do a sweep of the Forbidden Forest. I’ll talk with Harry about scheduling a time for looking around the Chamber of Secrets. Rufus – you’ll schedule training time with the Auror teams. Try for a third of them at a time, each Friday so everyone can have offensive training once every three weeks. I’ll come up with the galleons for the overtime and some better equipment. Please keep up with the Saturday training with Harry. He’s practiced what you’ve given him three hours a day during the

school holiday. I'll schedule a meeting with the Professor and invite whoever is available on the scheduled time. Is there anything else?"

No one volunteered anything and she inquired, "Have you found anything else in your research of the Marr horcrux collection?"

Connie replied, "The theory was put forward that the destruction of a horcrux wouldn't diminish the maker's skill with his wand, or power, rather his stamina."

Anna, who was many years younger than her partner, snorted at her remark, while Rufus looked annoyed.

Connie smiled politely at the Senior Auror and added, "There's no need to look ruffled Rufus, we weren't commenting on your stamina."

Scrimgeour grumbled quietly while Amelia commented, "I suppose that's good and bad. No one wants to get into a firefight with Riddle, but if they do and they're able to dodge the first few spells, they might have a chance. Is there anything else?"

No one responded and Amelia concluded, saying, "We'll meet again next week."

... --- ...

Miles away from London, the two wizards sat in the dimly lit room, waiting for their Master to speak. Wormtail assumed a more subservient role in the presence of the Dark Lord's other faithful follower. His Master wasn't sitting on his lap, rather in a high backed chair cushioned by a blanket, ostensibly for the cold, but also to disguise his minuscule form. Riddle asked, "What have you to report, Barty. Has the boy been given the means of competing in the second task?"

Junior replied, "Master, I suggested to Professor Sprout that one of Potter's friends would like a book on magical water plants. I don't believe that he possesses the skill needed to maintain a simple Bubble Head charm for an hour. I will talk with the boy a few days before the task. I didn't want to reveal my hand by directly aiding him."



Pettigrew asked, "What happens if he doesn't know the charm or learn of the magical plant?"

Junior replied, "Based on his high score from the first task, he'd still be allowed to compete in the third task."

Riddle considered the conversations and directed, "You have done enough. If he fails, he fails. Do not reveal yourself outside of the normal classroom activities. We have too much to lose and too little to gain by any additional coaching of the boy. If he thrashes around in the cold water, we have lost nothing except a favorable starting position in the third task. By a stroke of luck, Potter won the first task. There is nothing to worry about."

Pettigrew had nothing to add, so Riddle asked Crouch, "Is there anything that you need?"

Junior replied, "No. I have enough gold from the old crone, McGonagall. I need to visit the apothecary and obtain more Boomslang skin and Bicorn powder for the potion. What else can I do for you, Master?"

Riddle was worried about the stability of his current form, but he didn't want to make that admission. The dizzy spell from a few days ago had ended and hadn't reoccurred. He concluded the meeting saying, "Do nothing to jeopardize the plan. Find out if there is anything else known about the Old Fool's injury beyond what was reported in the newspaper. Report back to me after the second task has played out."

Junior took his leave, saying, "I shall go pay my Father a visit and see how the Weasley boy is doing. He has unknowingly enabled much of our plan to succeed."

Riddle acknowledged Junior's departure and announced, "It is time to eat, Wormtail. Milk Nagini for me."

Wormtail silently cursed his lot in life as he went to find his Master's snake.

... --- ...

Friday 30 December

Susan missed being able to watch Harry paddle around the pool while lying on her floatie. Floaties simply didn't work in the winter. Regardless of the fact that her Auntie had cast a warming charm on the water so it was bathtub warm, the air was freezing. That left her with the option of being in the water or sitting out wearing a sweat suit.

Despite Senior Auror Scrimgeour's best efforts, Harry was unable to master the Bubble Head charm. He could cast it, and as long as he was consciously thinking about it, could hold it. However, he had yet to hold it for longer than a minute.

Remarkably, the book that her Head of House, Professor Sprout had given her for Christmas had referenced gillyweed. A trip yesterday to the exotic plants shop and sixty galleons later, her boyfriend was the proud owner of ten doses of the rubbery, wormy looking plant. Scrimgeour had insisted that he try it a few times to get used to it, and as a result, her boyfriend was zooming around on the bottom of the pool, swimming twice as fast as she could, with the aid of his webbed hands and feet. She looked at her watch again. It had been nearly an hour since he'd taken it. The young teen cringed as he flinched at the obvious pain of the transformation, but a minute later, she had her boyfriend back.

She paddled over to him and asked, "How was it this time, Aqua Man?"

Harry replied, "Loads better this time. It hurt pretty bad the first time." He held his arms out and she snuggled into his grasp. He did his best to maintain eye contact and said, "This is nice."

She snuggled a bit closer into him, felt something that surprised her, and quickly wriggled away, saying, "Sorry... I didn't mean to..."

Harry felt his face go pale, "I didn't mean to... Sorry."

Regaining her composure quicker than her boyfriend, she suggested, "Maybe we should go in for a while. We're getting pretty worked up here."

They both nodded and as they got out, thought to themselves, 'Especially me.'

The cold air felt good as they walked back into the house.

... --- ...

Monday 9 January

Filius Flitwick folded the newspaper and looked across the staff table. As he expected, Hagrid had already left. Skeeter's article announcing the "confession of the half giant's heritage" at the Yule Ball had been especially biting. Hagrid wasn't a skilled politico who occasionally needed to be taken down a notch or two. He was, simply put, a kind and gentle man who spent most of his time caring for others and trying to make the world a better place.

The diminutive professor recalled the similar taunts that his father had been half-goblin (which was true) from his days on the international dueling circuit in the '20s. As he was pondering what to do, he heard the outraged objection from Miss Granger, "Well it was obvious, but that doesn't give that cow any reason to go after him like that. Hagrid wouldn't hurt anyone. He's one of the nicest men that I know."

She and Harry went to the Hufflepuff table to go collect Susan Bones and together they marched off to go talk some sense into their distraught friend.

The brilliant educator got up to leave and muttered, "One-hundred points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

ooo CCC ooo

"Old Crone??? Detention, Mr. Crow! Detention with Mr. Filch for a week. I don't care if you've been visiting the lunatic fringe, there is no

excuse for disrespecting a Hogwarts Professor.” Even the gray hair in her tight bun seemed angry at the insult.

Her words had fallen on deaf ears, as the old scribe had already left the building.

The highly offended educator noticed that he’d written something on her classroom blackboard before leaving. It appeared to say, Meddle 4816968.

Still worried about the Headmaster, she went to her office to sample some of the moonshine potion that Crow had left the last time she’d seen him.

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Second Task

... --- ...

Saturday 11 February

Hermione Granger was unquestionably the smartest witch of her age, but on occasion, even the best can blow a call. When Harry had come up to her two weeks before the Second Task and asked about getting Susan a gift for Valentine's day, she had asked him how much he wanted to spend. When he had replied about twenty-five Galleons, she had suggested that he let Susan pick out something special from Circe's Secret. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, as his girlfriend had really liked the shampoo and knickers that she'd picked out for him to give her for Christmas. It might have been, had the afternoon unfolded as she'd expected.

It hadn't. She had overlooked Harry's propensity for attracting train wrecks.

Hogsmeade wasn't very large, really, but with the ease of Floo and Apparation, its business hours population was several times its resident population. The only all-wizarding village in all of Great Britain had a shopping district rivaling Diagon Alley. Student attractions aside, it tended towards quality merchandise. There were few tatty, ordinary shops, and almost none of the shady enterprises that lurked in Knockturn Alley. So, as Valentine's Day approached, Hogsmeade was swarming with wizards and witches, all searching for the perfect gift.

Per Susan's instructions, he'd given her a half hour head start to shop. During that time, he'd bought a small gift for Hermione for being such a good friend, and two cases of butterbeer to share with his dorm mates. Harry walked out of the Three Broomsticks into a virtual sea of magical humanity, seeking the lingerie shop.

As he walked towards the shop, he reviewed Hermione's well-intentioned advice, but it seemed to be of little value. She'd pressed

him to be a gentleman and to be sure to compliment Susan on anything she purchased and chose to show him. He couldn't imagine his Susan not looking great in anything she bought. While he'd never told his best friend, he'd already seen her starkers and in knickers only although admittedly, both episodes had been complete accidents - at least from Harry's perspective. In fact, he'd seen most of her wardrobe since Amelia had taken him in. He was certain that she'd look wonderful in whatever she picked out.

This invitation had been different than his Christmas shopping trip. In December, Harry had stood outside the doors of the shop, not even daring to go in when Susan had purchased his extra Christmas gifts. This time she'd offered to model his purchase!!!

As his seventh year friend, Mike, would say, "Gryffindors go forward," so after giving Susan a half hour head start, Harry gingerly made his way towards the 'underwear shop.' He began to worry that he would never make it to the rendezvous on time, when miraculously, the sea of shoppers parted. Startled, he looked up to see his first friend, Hagrid.

"Harry!" boomed the giant, "How're yeh?"

Ears ringing, Harry managed to get out, "Fine, thank you! Are you getting Madam Maxime something for Valentine's Day, Hagrid?"

"Yer a smart one, 'arry. I've one mo' stop to make - Scri'nshafts. Red ink and some stationary for 'er. I think she's gotten me a new tie."

Wisely, Harry chose not to comment about his friend's choice of ties, and simply nodded. The wiry teen and the Ent-sized half giant fell in together, not really trying to converse. Harry could barely make himself heard over the crowd. Besides, he was getting winded at the near run he had to manage to keep up with Hagrid while juggling the two cases of butterbeer and the gift for Hermione. One day, he promised himself, he'd have to learn a better shrinking and lightening charm.

Harry had wandered the streets of Hogsmeade a few times, but nearly always with friends. Poor for so long, he wasn't really much of a shopper. Besides, he hadn't had his permission slip signed as a third year. He could find the Three Broomsticks pub or the stationary store when he could see it, but with Hagrid on the store side of the sidewalk, Harry was forced out into the slushy street for his package-juggling jog next to his towering friend. So when Hagrid abruptly turned into Scrivenshaft's, Harry had already passed his destination and had to reverse course and hurry back.

Inside the shop, Susan had been a busy, busy witch. Twenty-five Galleons was a fair bit of money for a young teen to spend on lingerie. She had looked at almost everything, and then narrowed the selections to the ones she could afford and would dare to show to her boyfriend.

Her attention was currently entirely focused on the breathtaking teddy she was trying on. It was magical. Literally. It cycled between virtually transparent and almost opaque, the effect changing and moving just as the eye was drawn to an area. The color was indescribable. She'd been watching it for a minute in the mirror and still couldn't tell what color it was. It was iridescent red one moment, then filmy blue, then seemingly made of emerald smoke the next. The longer she watched, the more colors she saw. The feel of it on her bare skin was like nothing she had ever experienced. She wondered whether she could borrow a bit of his Gryffindor courage to let him see her in it and whether he'd like it if she did.

Finally inside the shop, Harry had managed to wrangle his rebellious packages into some semblance of order. He looked around in embarrassed wonder at the animated and astonishingly lifelike display manikins, shopping witches, and bemused wizards alike. He finally came to rest at the far end, entirely unaware that behind the curtains before him were the changing rooms where several witches were trying on slips of clothing, the likes of which he'd never even dreamed.

"Finally," sighed Harry as he looked around for Susan. "Peace and quiet."

He had spoken too soon. Circe's Secret, which had just opened prior to the Christmas holidays, hadn't counted on the Valentine's Day crush of shoppers eager to get into the changing rooms.

As Harry let out the breath he'd been holding, Millicent Bulstrode, who was charging full speed towards the curtains carrying some sort of leather garment, jostled him. Even in the magical world, momentum and mass counted. Little Harry had no chance at all against the determined leviathan that crashed into him on her way to the last open changing booth.

Distracted for a moment by the metal spikes that he'd seen, Harry went flying without a broom! He instinctively put his hand out to brace himself against the curtained wall before him...

...which turned out to be curtains only, curtains through which he fell awkwardly, arm still outstretched...

...the hand of which finally came to rest on a prominent part of Susan's delightful anatomy, leading to a squeal, first of fright and then delight...

...as Harry's head followed the attached arm and the rest of Harry followed his head...

...which instantaneously stopped functioning as realized that he'd knocked her over.

Outside the curtain, the two cases of butterbeer went flying into the air and shattered when they hit the slate floor, splattering everything and everyone in the store with the warm, syrupy liquid.

Pandemonium reigned.

Inside the dressing room, Harry was lying on the floor motionless, completely unable to engage his teenage boy brain. Harry, who could face down a sixty-foot basilisk, or stand toe to toe with a dragon, found that his courage had completely turned to mush over the



realization that his hand was well underneath Susan's teddy and his girlfriend was lying face down, on top of his arm.

Fortunately Susan, who was able to think a little better in this situation than her boyfriend, knew she should call her Auntie Amelia. She began to gently extract herself from her boyfriend's caress and reach for her phone, but then thought better of it and hugged him for dear life. She whispered, "Don't be embarrassed, Harry. I won't break."

Carpe Diem.

Harry whispered, "Gringotts can handle the damages."

She looked into his emerald green eyes, and kissed her boyfriend for a full minute before they both admitted that it was time to go back to the castle.

Fortunately, the Daily Prophet hadn't been able to hire a replacement photographer yet, and Skeeter was covering a speech at the Ministry, so the incident never made the newspaper.

Harry ended up buying Susan roses for Valentine's Day. Perhaps it was just as well.

... --- ...

Friday 17 February

Amelia understood the concept of a limited window of opportunity for a project. She knew that the Auror corp. was undersized for a government that was gearing up in preparation to fight a war on terror. She was painfully aware that Fudge had frozen headcount at the Ministry to the current level. That said, she had sixty-eight people, including herself, who carried a badge and couldn't increase that number. Even if she had the money, she couldn't go out and quietly hire a dozen Auror recruits. There was too much bureaucracy to keep such a move hidden. What she thought she could do was to train them to be able to change their focus from solving domestic disputes and catching shoplifters to that of a group of rapid-response small-unit fighting teams.

She believed that as soon as Riddle regained a body and Lord Voldemort made his presence known to his followers, the first thing that they would do would be to go out and recruit additional followers. Her Aurors needed to be equipped and trained to interdict the enemy while sustain a minimal casualty rate of their own.

For that, she needed gold.

Naturally, she didn't have the budget and knew that not only would going to Fudge to ask for the funds be fruitless, it would be counterproductive. The last thing in the world that she wanted to do was to tip off the Malfoys and their kind, who would use the information against them. Nor did she expect the Aurors to go out and buy their own safety equipment, or work overtime for free.

For that, she needed galleons.

She believed that if the Aurors wore a quality armored-vest, their survival rate in a serious firefight would double. Ethics aside, it made good business sense to provide her team with military-quality dragonhide battle gear. Additionally, she believed that if she provided them with eighty hours of offensive spell and military level battle training, she could improve their survival rate by another twenty-five percent. Finally, she believed that while she officially lacked the authority to borrow money on behalf of the Ministry, a future Minister of Magic, who had better vision and fewer ties to the Death Eaters that had escaped justice in the last war, would reimburse her for the gold that she felt that she needed to spend today.

For that, she needed Harry Potter.

The goblins had paid Harry 200,000 galleons for the basilisk that he'd killed. He'd deposited the gold in his trust vault, and even without it, had more than enough gold to date and splurge with until he was well into his twenties. That completely ignored his family money. She was certain that if she asked him to simply give her the gold, he would, without giving it a second thought. Instead, she would pledge her home in Welshpool as collateral for an interest free, five-year loan of 200,000 galleons. She knew that her home wasn't worth that much,

but it was what she had. She didn't want to pressure Harry and wanted someone else to present the offer to Harry – meager as it was.

For that, she needed Connie Hammer.

... --- ...

Saturday 18 February

The second challenge of the Tri-Wizard Tournament was, by longstanding tradition, crafted by the headmaster of the host school. Dumbledore's idea had been fairly simple. 75 percent of the second task involved deciphering the clue. The actual execution of the task (at least in Dumbledore's mind) was fairly simple. It had been his expectation that the contestants would either use the Bubble Head charm or gillyweed to complete the task.

Merchifetime Murcus recalled the conversation that the old land-dweller Dumbledore had had with her some six lunar tides previously.

“The three Champions will each have one designated hostage for you to watch over. I will place each of the hostages under an enchanted sleep, which will allow them to remain under water for several hours. I would ask that you protect them from any hostile creatures and allow any given contestant to only take one hostage back with them.”

Murcus agreed and replied, “We will ensure that no harm comes to the sleeping land-dwellers. We will keep them in our village at the bottom of the lake where we live.”

... --- ...

As the morning of the second task dawned, Headmaster Dumbledore led the four hostages down to the lake where he saw the six mermen bobbing their heads just above the water. The little Delacour girl, Gabrielle, saw the greenish gray heads sticking out of the water and gave a frightened whimper.

Susan watched with increasing trepidation as Fleur's little sister was put into an enchanted sleep and levitated into the arms of the two waiting merman. Cho gave the Hufflepuff a pleading look as she was asked to step forward.

Susan squeezed Hermione's hand as the Headmaster called her new friend to come forward. They looked into each other's eyes for a moment and simultaneously whispered, "Good luck" to each other.

When Hermione had disappeared beneath the waves and the additional mermen had arrived, Headmaster Dumbledore called, "It's your turn, Miss Bones." She stepped forward, saw the jet of gray light and closed her eyes.

... --- ...

The dark, foreboding lake that bordered Hogwarts wasn't, strictly speaking, a lake. About half a mile wide at the widest part and several miles long, the water was a part of the Loch Ness inlet that connected to the North Sea. Black Lake was unusual, not so much for its size - rather the depth.

Only a few yards from the shore, the water became quite deep, going from five to twenty-five feet, then from twenty-five to nearly two-hundred feet very quickly. In fact, the area just beyond the Mermaid Village at the far end of the lake was well over four-hundred feet deep.

... ---...

As they waited for the second task to start, Amelia hated herself. The slippery-tongued Headmaster had only mentioned in the briefest of passing that other students would be involved in the second event. She recalled nodding, not in granting parental permission; rather in acknowledgement of his statement. It wasn't that she loved her Susie any more, or her Harry any less, but she had at least agreed that Harry could participate in the tournament. She never knowingly agreed to endanger Susie too.

As Connie Hammer was rightfully bellowing into her ear for a massive lapse of judgment in allowing both of her children to have anything to do with this, 'pointless, evil, tournament,' she wondered how many other occasions there had been where the old Headmaster had pulled some double-worded, half-truth of a plan on other people without their knowledge.

Hammer declared, "He should have had his arm amputated just below the neck for thinking that this tournament was a good idea. When do they start?"

Undisturbed by her protective friend's verbal viciousness, Amelia replied, "The contestants will be read the rules in about five minutes and then they'll dive in."

Connie could barely sit still as they waited while Amelia watched in silent agony. Both of her children were at risk and she had a very bad feeling that something tragic was about to happen.

... --- ...

There was a feeling of nervousness in the air that Harry hadn't sensed from the first task as the Champions stood in line at the shore's edge waiting to run in. As they were waiting, they all shook hands and lined up again. Suddenly Bagman called, "Go," and they all took a few steps into the icy cold water before diving in.

Harry bit down on the wad of gillyweed that he had previously placed between his cheek and gum. Within seconds, the now familiar pain on either side of his neck hit him. A few seconds later, he felt his hands and feet elongate with webs growing between his fingers and toes. He quickly stopped shivering; instead enjoying the coolness of the water. Within a minute, he passed Fleur and Cedric, who'd both cast the bubblehead charm and were swimming off in different directions. As he swam directly for the village, he lost sight of the other two champions. He looked in either direction in the steadily darkening water, but didn't see Victor.

Harry wondered how the other champions were faring as he went deeper and deeper into the lake. Would the Bubble Head charm work

in the deeper water that felt like it was under much more pressure than when he had been paddling around just beneath the surface of the dark and bone chilling water? As the light grew dimmer and dimmer in the deepening water, Harry was relieved that he'd chosen to use the gillyweed. He was able to see perfectly in the dark water.

Harry continued to dive deeper.

... --- ...

Despite the murmuring and agitated noise from the crowd, Connie tried her best to remain calm as the task began. Bagman announced the description of the task – the egg that the Champions had retrieved during the first task had provided them with a clue about the nature of the second challenge. Since all of the champions were wearing swimming apparel, it was assumed that they had all successfully deciphered the clue.

Bagman had the Champions jump into the water where they disappeared and the giant clock started.

... --- ...

Harry had a tense moment when he passed by a group of a half-dozen Grindylows that appeared to be hiding and waiting in ambush of some unsuspecting prey. He took the knife that Sirius had given him out of the pocket of his board shorts as best as he could with his less than nimble webbed fingers, then he carefully selected one of the stunning keys and pressed the button on the handle of the knife. Like a switchblade, it fired with an audible snick. However, instead of a blade swishing out, a stunning spell flew out and hit one of the water demons. His fellows wanted nothing to do with the odd-looking, spell-throwing creature and quickly swam off, dragging their co-conspirator along with them. Harry put the knife back in the pocket of his swimsuit and continued swimming toward the village.

... --- ...

Unable to contain herself any longer Connie blurted, "So Susie is tied up at the bottom of a loch that's hundreds of feet deep and contains God only knows what dangerous creatures. How can you sit there so calm?"

Amelia looked at her friend with a wry smile on her face and replied, "It must be your words of comfort."

They each gave a small laugh at themselves and quietly waited as the minutes on the big clock ticked by.

... --- ...

Merchieftainess Murcus and the others waited patiently for the young land-dwellers to appear and claim their brethren. They enjoyed being involved in the old land dweller's contest. The mermen shook their tridents menacingly at several grindylows who had just swam up to examine the odd sight of the tethered hostages, just as they had done earlier in the day with the giant squid who shared the loch with them.

Somewhat sooner than they had expected, one of the land dwellers who had somehow corrected his feet and hands came into sight. The young land-dweller swam closer and appeared agitated as he came up to the hostages, who were tethered to wooden posts buried into the sandy bottom. He looked at one of the hostages with mud colored hair, and then swam towards another with bloodstone colored hair.

She watched as he took a shiny object from his covering and used it to cut the land-dweller from her seaweed tether.

Suddenly Murcus noticed that a fairly large shark was swimming towards the land-dwellers who were tethered to the stakes. Normally the merpeople didn't worry about the occasional open water fish that came into their loch. They ignored them whenever possible and as often as not, the sharks eventually swam back to the open water.

Murcus reminded the merman of their pledge to the old wizard to protect the young land-dwellers for the duration of their game. The

shark appeared to come closer and the mermen waved their razor sharp tridents menacingly.

At that point, two things happened at the same time. The first land-dweller kissed his newly reclaimed mate and she woke up from the enchanted sleep that Dumbledore had placed on her. In a panic, she realized that she couldn't breathe in the frigid water and frantically clutched the land-dweller who had claimed her.

Secondly, the shark that had been circling the village made a sudden lunge for one of the tethered land-dwellers. Observing their promise to keep the land-dwellers safe, the two mermen guarding the hostages threw their tridents at the approaching shark.

... --- ...

Connie was beside herself. She squeezed Amelia's hand tighter than she had been and ranted, "This is a hundred times worse than stake-out duty."

Amelia tuned out her talkative friend, nodded and waited in silence, praying for her children's safety.

... --- ...

Susan's sudden awakening came as a complete surprise to Harry. His kiss must have ended the enchantment! She clung to him, frantically hoping that he could somehow take her to safety before she died – either from the icy cold water or lack of oxygen. Harry reached into the pocket of his board shorts and withdrew the spare clump of gillyweed that he had brought with him. Unfortunately his webbed fingers lacked their usual dexterity and the small clump of the life-saving aquatic plant slipped out of his grasp and began to drift away.

Susan was increasingly terrified as she looked around her. Her lungs were aching and she felt herself grow lightheaded from the lack of oxygen. Instinctively, she tightened her hold on Harry, which didn't aid in his equally frantic attempt to save her. He pushed her away for



a moment and reached into his pocket again desperately grasping for another fragment of the slimy substance. Finally, the tips of his fingers closed around several more strands and he yanked them free, torn between the need for haste and the necessity to be certain not to drop it again.

She was chilled to the bone and had begun convulsing uncontrollably as Harry shoved the wormy plant into her mouth and held his hand over it to keep her from gagging. He prayed that he would be in time.

Her oxygen-starved brain was ready to shut down when she began to breathe. A few seconds later, she was no longer freezing. She began snogging her boyfriend for dear life. When they finally broke the kiss, her gaze turned to the other hostages and she saw a dreadful sight.

... --- ...

Murcus watched in satisfaction as the two mermen's aim was true and the rapidly approaching shark was pierced with both tridents. The water billowed with blood and the dying shark sank to the bottom of the loch.

Her feeling of satisfaction turned to horror when, somehow, the shark transformed into one of the land-dwellers!!!

... --- ...

Scarcely able to believe her eyes, Susan tugged Harry's arm, pointing past the hostages, and he turned to see the wounded shark transform back into Victor Krum. In total shock and dismay, he stared for a brief second, then snapped into action. He pointed to Hermione and then the direction back to the castle, and Susan understood her task. She attempted to untie the unconscious Gryffindor as Harry swam as fast as he could to reach the nearly motionless Quidditch star.

Susan soon succeeded in freeing the still slumbering form of Hermione and quickly caught up with Harry, who was doing his best to swim to shore while towing the much larger teen, who still had two

tridents embedded in him. One of the three-pronged spears had struck him in the thigh, while the other had deeply pierced his upper chest.

Krum's blood trail began to diminish as they swam as fast as humanly possible to shore. Unfortunately, even with webbed fingers and feet, it seemed to take forever to cover the half mile back to land while towing a badly wounded wizard.

As they approached the shallower water near the shore the light in the water became much brighter. But when Susan finally broke the surface and bobbed her head above water screaming a frantic cry for help, she noticed with dread that the water by Krum was now clear.

... --- ...

Connie and Amelia were watching nervously, eyes alternating between scanning the water near the shore and watching the minutes tick ever-so-slowly off the giant clock.

Suddenly, there was a great thrashing of the water about a hundred feet from shore.

Connie rejoiced, "It's Susan! Look, there's Harry. Oh look! She's got Hermi... Oh no..."

Harry had managed to haul Krum to the surface. She could see the handle of the trident sticking out of the front of his chest.

Susan's initial scream was soon echoed from the viewing stands as the students and other spectators began to comprehend the awful scene unfolding before them. As a pair of Durmstrang instructors relieved him of his burden, Harry collapsed to his knees for an instant, as he immediately turned to help Susan pull the slowly awakening Hermione from the water.

Connie found herself racing after Amelia as the two witches hurried from the stands to assist the three teens. Soon the adrenaline would wear off and the grim reality would sink in. For in spite of their very best effort to get him to shore and all of the effort from the witches

and wizards who reached in for them, and all of the healing spells and potions in Madame Pomfrey's arsenal, Victor Krum, age eighteen, was dead.

Some fifteen minutes later, Cedric Diggory and Fleur Delacour returned to the surface with their hostages, only to find out that one of their fellow Champions was gone. Soon after, Dumbledore conferred with Murcus, who explained what had happened, but it didn't change anything.

Victor Krum was dead.

... --- ...

Fifteen minutes later, Rita Skeeter was convinced that she had gotten the scoop of her lifetime. Assigned to cover the story, but banned from the Hogwarts grounds, she had remained out of sight, hidden in her beetle form. When the Champions surfaced, she had flown over and landed on the Granger girl, who was now standing by the shore wrapped in a warm blanket.

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The distraught teen was near hysteria, clinging to Harry Potter, sobbing into his chest while he held her tight. Interestingly, the Bones girl didn't seem to be bothered by this intimate contact between her boyfriend and her rival for his affections, but was adding her own words of comfort. But that was a story she could pursue later. The gruesome death of the most famous Quidditch player in the world would make headlines on every continent!

She listened to Potter haltingly explain what had happened, wishing she could use her Quick Quotes Quill in her animagus form. Incredibly, not twenty feet away the Bulgarian champion lay covered up in a blanket with the two tridents on the ground beside him while heated accusations, recriminations, and threats were volleyed back and forth between the organizers of the competition and representatives of the young man's school.

She had finally heard the entire story and was preparing to take her leave when Harry noticed a bug in his distraught friend's hair, and casually flicked it into the water with his finger. Before Rita could transform back, a fish swam to the surface and swallowed its meal.

Unannounced, the Tri-Wizard Tournament had claimed yet another victim.

... --- ...

Depending on your point of view, there was arguing, shouting or emotional discussion going on, well into the night. Krum's parents had been at the event and were shattered at the sight of their oldest son as he emerged from the water.

Bagman, for some inexplicable reason, ranted almost nonstop that the tournament be called off. His stated reason was that the tournament was simply too dangerous. His unstated reason was less benevolent – he had borrowed even more money and wagered it on the tournament. He somehow believed that in the event that the tournament was cancelled, he would win his bet.

After they had been discussing matters for several hours, Barty Crouch unexpectedly walked into the room. He did not look to be in

good health and surprised everyone by reciting an arcane ruling that indicated that while the school that had lost a Champion was able to name a replacement, it was not eligible to withdraw from the tournament.

Amelia, who had talked about fitting Harry for an armored vest prior to the second task vowed that he would be fully armored and carry an emergency portkey if he competed in the third task.

McGonagall was worried that the Grangers would withdraw their daughter from school when they learned that she had been so closely involved with a death in a situation for which they hadn't even given their permission.

In fact, however, she had been in less danger in this particular instance than she had encountered in every single year she'd been a student at Hogwarts thus far. Once she regained her composure, Hermione would quickly determine that the outcome of this episode would be no different than the others. She would find a way to explain it away, as she had no intention of leaving her best friends at a time like this.

Due to circumstances that only Amelia and Snape knew about, Dumbledore had lost much of his interest in the tournament. If possible, he would have been willing to be talked into canceling the tournament, if it had not been for the impassioned announcement from Karkarov that Victor's younger brother, Peter had been appointed to take his place.

Reluctantly, they all agreed that Peter Krum would be considered to be in second place, with Cedric and Fleur tied for third, based on Victor having reached the village second. The Krum family left the next morning to bury their son and brother. Peter would be back by the following Friday.

... --- ...

Within the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff common rooms there were no celebrations that weekend. One look at the grim faces of Harry and Hermione as he helped her through the portrait hole promptly

squelched any festive thoughts any of their housemates might have been entertaining. The identical scenario played out when Susan and Cedric returned to the Badger den. In each location, the anxious murmuring that filled the room ceased as the pair of students who had returned from the bottom of Black Lake silently parted and headed for their rooms without speaking to their classmates. The silence lingered for some time following their passage as the ultimate, inescapable fact of the day stood out.

Viktor Krum was dead.

... --- ...

It was a quiet week at the school. Lacking any new ideas to improve morale, Dumbledore attempted to lift everyone's spirits by announcing that there would be an extra Hogsmeade visit the next weekend and all students, regardless of their age were invited to attend.

Naturally, the younger students saw the unanticipated privilege as a major opportunity, and by Friday their obvious excitement had slowly spread throughout the school. While the principals directly involved in the day's events – Harry, Susan, Hermione, Cedric, Cho, Fleur and her sister – soberly contemplated abrupt and capricious nature of the tragedy they had experienced, life at Hogwarts slowly returned to normal.

... --- ...

Friday 3 March

Minerva was surprised to receive an owl on Friday morning as she was having breakfast. She tended to receive most of her mail later in the school year from perspective employers inquiring about promising students. Early March would normally be a few weeks premature for those inquiries. She opened the envelope and began reading as her fellow professors did with their respective letters. Her eyes involuntarily closed as she held the letter with one hand and rubbed her forehead with the other.

Professor McGonagall,

Words fail to express the anger, frustration and feelings of betrayal that we have regarding Hermione's forced participation in the barbaric contest that is being held at your school.

When we met several years ago, you assured us that the wizarding world was a remarkable place, and that Hogwarts would be nothing more than a positive experience for our child.

Your actual results have been nothing short of pathetic. Hermione had barely been in school eight weeks, and you wrote advising that she'd received minor injuries at the hands of a twelve foot troll, which had 'somehow found its way' into the castle. You assured us that her injuries were a most unusual event and that nothing like it would ever happen again. A year later, she missed six weeks of class, petrified by what turned out to be a sixty-foot monster. When we sent her withdrawal letter, you assured us that it had been a 'most unusual, unheard of' event and our child would never be placed in harm's way again while she attended your school. As such, we cancelled the notification.

We are attaching a newspaper clipping describing her 'unwilling participation' in an event in which a student suffered a violent death. We expect that it will not come as any sort of surprise to you, since it was apparently a school sponsored event.

Professor, allow me to refresh your memory on three points:

- 1) Our daughter is a minor
- 2) We did not give our permission for her to participate in a non-academic activity which would endanger our child
- 3) Based on the newspaper account, we have little reason to believe that our daughter willingly accepted the role of 'hostage' in your contest.

As such, we are requesting your presence at our home tomorrow 4 March at 9 AM to discuss the situation. It is our intent to withdraw our

daughter at the end of the semester, but in fairness to her, we have agreed with her request to meet with you and hear you out.

Emma Granger DDS

Daniel Granger DDS

Dumbledore looked at McGonagall as she carefully refolded the letter and replaced it in the envelope before tucking it into one of the pockets of her robe. He asked, "Anything interesting?"

She looked over and couldn't help seeing the emptiness where his left arm had been a few weeks earlier, and decided against thrashing the man for his lack of judgment. Instead, she replied, "No, it's some bad news that I've been expecting for a while. As such, I'll be out of the castle for most of the day tomorrow."

ooo CCC ooo

"Mr. Crow!!! How dare you?"

The old scribe was tempted to mention, 'I had help from my apprentice, .Hunter,' but decided that those details could wait.

"Insufficient respect for the deceased..."

"Flicking that poor woman into the water to be gobbled up by a common minnow..."

"Gratuitous ..."

"Blatant misrepresentation..."

Crow, thinking about the old saying, 'don't cry over spilled butterbeer,' was going to say something, but couldn't as she continued her rant.

"The idea, placing Miss Bones in a compromising position like that..."



He admitted that she had looked quite cold.

As he closed the door behind him, the old scribe remembered that he only reported what he'd actually seen and fortunately, hadn't commented about Miss Bulstrode.

Still furious, but lacking an outlet, McGonagall picked up a slip of parchment that read Runemaster 5077573 that Crow must have dropped. It looked important, so she kept it.

## Chapter Fifteen

### The Gathering Storm

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Saturday 4 March

While his head of house was contemplating what to say to the dentists, Harry opened the letter that Amelia's owl had delivered to him.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for showing such faith in me. As Connie explained, I'm putting the gold that you have loaned me to good use. I have ordered lightweight battle armor for each of the Aurors. Training in offensive small-unit battle tactics will begin next week.

While I'm certain that the Ministry will choose to repay your loan within the terms that you signed, I have signed my home at Welshpool over to you as collateral. The deed is in your vault at Gringotts.

We will prevail against the darkness that has begun encroaching on our land. Have faith.

Love,

Amelia

Hermione watched Harry as he nodded in grim satisfaction, while he read the letter. He didn't offer any explanation, but as she'd come to be a bit less nosey than in previous years, she didn't attempt to force an answer from him. He looked at her and nodded, before saying, "I have my lesson with Rufus in a few minutes. I'll see you later this afternoon."

... --- ...

At nine AM, Minerva McGonagall apparated to the back garden of Miss Granger's parents' home. In every way possible, she felt that she had broken their trust. Minerva had read Hermione's mother's letter a total of five times. Emma Granger hadn't exaggerated her words or somehow taken them out of context. She had very carefully and methodically provided the Grangers with the light, happy music version of the wizarding world when she first met them. She hadn't mentioned the danger inherent in learning spellcraft. She'd intentionally ignored the prejudice which their muggleborn daughter was almost sure to encounter. She completely sidestepped the issue that if their daughter was successful in integrating into the magical world, they'd rarely see her. She never mentioned that if their daughter was a failure in the wizarding world, almost nothing that she'd learned would be applicable in one of the prestigious collages that they'd been considering.

She'd never mentioned her own surprise that Hermione had only received minor injuries in her first year. She'd completely hidden her astonishment that the girl hadn't been killed and eaten by the beast that had been roaming the hallways two years ago. As such, it came as no surprise to her that Amelia Bones was sitting in the Granger's family room waiting for her arrival.

Emma greeted her in a neutral voice, "Good morning, Professor."

"Good morning, Dr. Granger. May I come in?"

Armed with a harder face than her daughter, Emma replied, "Please have a seat. You remember my husband, Dan, and know Amelia Bones from the Board of School Governors?"

McGonagall replied, "Yes. Good morning, Dr. Granger, Amelia."

Dan Granger nodded but didn't say anything.

Minerva conceded defeat before either of the Grangers said a word. She began, "Doctor and Doctor Granger. Your letter accurately stated what has occurred relative to your daughter since she entered the magical world. When we first met, I clearly stated to you that

Hogwarts would be the safest environment for your wonderful daughter to develop and refine her magical gifts. While in general, I still believe that statement to be true; it certainly hasn't been your daughter's experience. As such, I will happily support whatever decision you make, write any recommendation letters that she may require to transfer to Beauxbatons or the Salem Academy – whatever you wish. I have failed you, Doctor and Doctor Granger. I accepted full responsibility for your daughter's safety and I've let you down. For that, I apologize with all of my heart."

Emma wasn't certain what she expected, but the fact that Professor McGonagall had accepted promising a safe environment for Hermione and not delivering it came as something of a surprise. She had rather expected some weasel-worded, half-truth statement that there had been extenuating circumstances. She stood and said, "Professor, if you and Director Bones would excuse us for a moment - Dan, could I speak with you for a minute in the kitchen?"

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After they had closed the door, Dan asked, "How do we know she'd be any safer in France or Massachusetts?" While he believed that Hermione would be safer away from Britain, he felt compelled to ask the question. He typically assumed the role of devil's advocate in these types of discussions with his beloved Emma.

"We don't," admitted Emma. "Maybe their ability to heal these sorts of severe injuries has so jaded their perspective that they think nothing about it. Let's ask Amelia and get her opinion. She has a daughter in Hermione's class. We were at their home last summer for Harry's birthday, remember?"

"That's right," replied Dan. She seems a bit old for having teenage children."

"Probably, but I'd keep that opinion to yourself, if I were you," suggested Emma.

... --- ...

The dentists walked back into their living room where the two witches sat silently – each fully expecting to be asked to leave within the next minute. Emma surprised Amelia, stating, "Hermione mentions Susan and Harry in each of her letters. As a parent, how do you feel about their safety?"

Bones was in a bit of a quandary. She felt that full disclosure was the only right choice in this situation. She looked at McGonagall and said, "Minerva, could you excuse us for five minutes?"

She replied, "I shall be in the back garden."

Emma thought that Amelia's request may have been a bit extreme, but didn't say anything. She wanted the other parent's perspective.

When McGonagall had closed the door, Amelia began, "What I'm about to tell you hasn't been published in any newspaper. It doesn't yet represent official Ministry policy, but I believe it to be true. I consider it to be State Secret level, but as it affects you both, you have a right to know. As such, I ask your agreement to keep the information confidential. Is that acceptable?"

The dentists both nodded their heads slowly and replied, "I do, er, yes."

Amelia briefly explained as best that she could about the threat that a reborn Voldemort might represent, both to their daughter and Harry, but also to every living being on the planet. She explained about placing an Auror undercover at the school and that no one there, save the Headmaster and Healer Pomfrey knew her true identity.

The dentists were shocked at her words. They hadn't read anything like what she was saying in the Daily Prophet.

Bones explained that, while not yet announced to anyone, this was Professor Dumbledore's last year as headmaster, and that a search would soon begin with a vetting process taking place as soon as the short list was compiled.

She explained that Hermione had been noticed by those within the school and within the government. She personally hoped that talented young women like her daughter would play a significant role in moving the British wizarding world into the new millennium.

Dan asked, "How different is Hogwarts from another magical school or non-magical school, in terms of risk of injury to the student? The Daily Prophet that we subscribe to indicated that the headmaster from the Bulgarian school, Durmstrang, was outraged over weak planning of this event. I've heard of sports injuries at most colleges, but Hermione's been seriously injured on several occasions, and has never been involved in organized sports.

Amelia considered his question and statement for a moment and replied, "I have read each of the injury reports related to the school for the last ten years. On average, I see one a week. I must admit, that relative to studying chemistry or computer science, a student is many times more likely to be treated for injury in a school that teaches magic. In the same breath, it is fair to state that the magical world is much better equipped to rapidly treat those same injuries. My son, Harry, by example, injured his arm playing Quidditch two years ago and broke his arm. He spent the night in the hospital wing and the school healer regrew his bones overnight."

Emma acknowledged, "I think what you're saying is that while there are more dangers, there are also faster treatments. Is that correct?"

Amelia replied, "Yes – that's a fair statement. Back to the aspect of magic itself, the fact remains that your wonderful daughter has been given the gift of magic. Ultimately she will be in a fight against those who see the people of the world as theirs to enslave. My own children are in the same situation. I have responded by trying to help them acquire the skills that they will need to prevail in such a fight. As a parent, the last thing in the world that I would want is for my children to be hurt again. As parents of a magical child, here are some things that you can do to increase her protection and yours as well..."

A few minutes later she suggested, "If you wouldn't mind going and collecting Professor McGonagall, I'll be on my way." She believed

that the dentists and the transfiguration master could eventually work out their differences, and left them to their own discussions.

Emma invited Minerva back in and mentioned, "Amelia answered most of our questions and suggested that we finish our conversation with you. She informed us about the inherent risks of learning to control magic and handling magical creatures. I really only have one observation and one fundamental question for you."

Optimistic that Amelia had miraculously changed their perspective, McGonagall nodded encouragingly.

Emma continued, "As an observation, you would have prepared us much better if four years ago, you had somehow offered a one-day seminar demonstrating what we could expect to see, as parents of a magical child. I doubt that you would have scared us away, but we would have felt like we were much better informed."

McGonagall nodded, admitting that their idea was good.

Emma finished, saying, "My real question remains, how could an obviously responsible professional like yourself fail to recognize that a parent would expect to be asked – asked, not informed – that their child was going to be involved in such a dangerous activity? How would you react, if, as a parent, you had read about your daughter in the newspaper?"

Minerva hung her head in shame. The easy answer would be, 'I had nothing to do with it.' In fact, it would have been the truth. Yet, she felt that the blame ultimately rested on her shoulders, since parent communications were in her area of responsibility. Certainly Albus's horrible injury had been a significant distraction, but it shouldn't have changed the Granger's expectations – or Amelia's for that matter.

She replied, "You both deserve an answer to your question. I can't honestly say that I have one for you. Someone should have explained the situation clearly and asked for your permission to allow your daughter to participate in this event, and it didn't happen. I can only relate that Hermione wasn't the only student to have participated in this event without their parent's permission. Amelia's niece was also a

'hostage' in the second task." She regretted using the term the moment that the word left her lips.

Emma replied, "Obviously we're not happy about this and do not consider it to be a settled issue. My inclination remains to remove our daughter from your school at the end of the year, though my husband and I will want to talk about it more over the next few days. As such, I would ask two things from you – first, to state that our daughter is specifically prohibited from participating in any non-classroom activities. Secondly, I ask that you send us a withdrawal and transfer application form to the schools in France and Salem. Is that acceptable?"

Minerva nodded and replied, "Certainly. I shall honor your wishes and send you the forms that you requested this afternoon."

Emma replied, "Thank you, Professor. Last, but not least, I ask that you not discuss this with Hermione. We will certainly ask for her input, but the decision is ours."

Minerva replied, "I understand, and will certainly comply with your wishes. I appreciate your allowing me to talk your daughter's situation over with you. If I can be of any assistance, I would be happy to help you."

"Thank you for your time, Professor. We'll contact you with our decision before the end of the school year."

With that, the older woman walked out into the Granger's back garden and disappeared. She felt that Amelia had left this in her hands as a test of her aptitude as Headmistress. She felt like she had failed.

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While Minerva was out with the Grangers, Headmaster Dumbledore saw Harry sitting with Hermione Granger and Susan Bones eating their breakfast together. After collecting a newly arrived student, he led him over to their table and announced, "Peter, this is Mr. Harry Potter. Harry, I would like to introduce you to Mr. Peter Krum. He has



agreed to represent Durmstrang for the remainder of the Tri Wizard Tournament."

Harry held out his hand and greeted the other teen, "Hi."

Peter took Harry's hand and in halting English slowly asked, "Did you know my brother, da?"

Harry looked at the other teen for a moment. Whereas Viktor had been broad-shouldered and solid, the teen in front of him was slightly built, and Harry sensed that he was much more interested in academics than sports. His features were softer than Viktor's as if he took after his mother rather than the chiseled-faced man that Harry had seen with Viktor, who he presumed had been his father. Harry replied, "Yes, I knew your brother. We talked several times."

Peter asked, "He was a good Champion, da?"

Harry replied, "He was a very good Champion. I'm sure that you will be too."

Peter shook his head and replied, "Me books. No sports. Fifth year. You?"

"Fourth year. Would you like to eat breakfast with us? This is my good friend, Hermione and my girlfriend, Susan."

Peter had seen the pictures in the Bulgarian newspapers of Hermione and his brother at the Yule Ball and recognized her. He replied, "Da, I will sit with you."

They didn't say much as they ate, but as Dumbledore watched them, he knew it was a start.

... --- ...

Saturday 1 April

Even if it hadn't been a weekend, McGonagall and Dumbledore would have been tempted to declare it a school holiday. Fred and

George Weasley were celebrating their seventeenth birthdays. Everyone who knew them expected a display of utter mayhem.

With Harry's sponsorship, Lee Jordan had arranged to rent out Aberforth's pub for the afternoon. Herman Wintringham, lute player for the Weird Sisters, and his sister Lisa, who was the lead singer, were there, singing highly suggestive tunes, designed to delight the crowd and thoroughly embarrass the birthday twins.

Unable to embarrass the twins by her ribald songs or highly inappropriate gestures, Lisa turned to a tried and true crowd pleaser for the younger than normal audience – Snape bashing. It seemed that the largely Gryffindor and Hufflepuff crowd didn't have any Snape supporters, and as the songs centered around 'hooked nosed, under equipped, grease spots' the crowd cheered and hooted with every new verse.

Mundungus was there, on his usual stool, watching the entertainer with a drunken leer. He slurred, "Old Snape-face must have made... must have made quite an impression on the bird, calling him a worthless bog-roll."

The old barman replied, "More like a dog-end in my book. With his charm, he couldn't get laid in a whorehouse. The greasy bastard would probably fall off the bed. I honestly don't have a clue what Albus sees in him."

Fed and fueled, the crowd wandered back to the castle to resume the party in the Gryffindor common room.

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While Fred and George were being entertained, Dumbledore reached for a fresh piece of parchment in its accustomed upper left drawer of his ornate headmaster's desk. For about the hundredth time, he rolled his eyes and muttered something not intended for student ears. He had no left arm. His overconfidence had cost him that pound of flesh and was still collecting its tax in a thousand cruel ways.

Irked, he used his wand with a trifle more zeal than necessary and the innocent drawer flew open until stopped forcibly by the drawer stop. Half the loose sheets of parchment in the drawer continued onward, however, their momentum taking them airborne.

Dumbledore was beginning to get angry, but Fawkes intervened with a moment of pure melodic tranquility. The music of his song was the essence of serenity, helping the old wizard to calm himself and find humor in the rather grim situation. He grinned ruefully, chiding himself on the first tantrum of his second childhood.

At length, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore had a sheet of fresh parchment, a quill, and an inkwell. He set himself to write, only to have the paper spoilt by it sliding beneath the quill.

He closed his eyes and counted ten. He had always held the parchment still with his left hand. After a sigh, Dumbledore conjured a small sandbag, which he placed on the parchment to hold it steady while he wrote. Then he charmed the offending, errant ink from the parchment and began to write again.

"My dearest Amelia..."

And so it was that he and Amelia were greeted by Oliver Giles, owner of the exclusive Stirring Stick in Beckfoot, the finest wizarding restaurant north of Hadrian's Wall. Indeed, many felt it also superior to any south of the wall, as well.

"Headmaster! Director! Two of my favorite people in all the world," exclaimed Giles. "It has been too, too long since either of you have come to see us. And Headmaster, I was grieved to read of your misfortune in the south. I'm so terribly sorry to see that for once the Daily Prophet got the story right."

Turning slightly to face Amelia, he continued, "And Director, I have followed your brilliant career with great interest and enthusiasm. I ask only that the burden of your duties not keep you away so long between visits to us here."

Dumbledore smiled at his former student and replied, "Oliver, it is a pleasure to see you again. I daresay I speak for my charming companion as well in telling you how glad we are to be here tonight."

Amelia smiled and nodded; she had not been eager to accept this invitation, and Dumbledore's selection of this landmark restaurant was no small part of her decision to hear him out.

Giles smiled and gestured subtly to the maitre d'hotel. As the headwaiter approached, he continued, "You both know Morris, of course, but Gavin has retired." He lowered his voice and continued, "I prefer to hire our countrymen, as you know, but I simply could not find a sommelier in the Kingdom. I had to go abroad and hire an Italian. No help for it, none at all. But as you will see, Antonio truly knows his wines and is a most worthy successor to Gavin."

Morris - somehow, neither Dumbledore nor Amelia had ever learnt whether that was his surname or his given name - smiled at two of his favorite celebrity customers. Giles finished the hand off, saying "You both know that I am at your command for anything. Morris and Liam will both be happy to get me at any time. Please, enjoy your time with us."

"Thank you, Morris," replied Dumbledore.

"Now, Professor," asked Morris, "you'll be wanting your usual table tonight?"

Amelia wanted a private conversation and dreaded the extroverted headmaster's likely favorite table. She guessed that it would be chosen more for its visibility to the clientele than for its privacy. She looked relieved as Dumbledore answered, "I think not, Morris. My friend and I need a quiet place tonight, one where we will not be interrupted. We have much to discuss."

Morris had not risen to headwaiter by ignoring VIP requests. "I believe I have something suitable, Headmaster, Director. Would the Rose Room serve your needs?"

Amelia and Dumbledore shared a glance of assent before Dumbledore agreed to the small private dining room. While it was more often used for proposals and anniversaries, it saw frequent service for small, private dinner parties.

Amelia was impressed, despite herself. In her experience, Dumbledore loved outlandish robes in garish colors. He was not averse to attention either, chatting with virtually everyone. In fairness, though, she knew he knew virtually everyone, having been the Transfiguration professor or Headmaster for practically every witch or wizard under seventy-five. His international contact list was almost as impressive thanks to his ICW roles over the years. Even his muggle circle was enormous, partly due to the influence of generations of muggleborn students and partly due to his Wizengamot position, which drew him into contact with many in her Majesty's government. But tonight, Dumbledore was in a dark, deep green set of robes with black piping accents. He was avoiding undue attention, although not doing so in such a manner as to arouse comment. Amelia wondered what sort of evening was in store.

They followed Morris to the Rose Room, where he introduced Liam, their server before withdrawing. Liam left them with menus and the wine list, promising to bring Antonio over once they had decided on their entrees. Dumbledore and Amelia barely glanced at the menus, both having decided before arriving what they would have. Amelia was fond of Dover sole, and the Stirring Stick was rightly famous for theirs. Dumbledore was more a traditional beefeater, but chose a prawn salad that he could eat with only one hand.

Having taken their orders, Liam returned with Antonio. "Headmaster, Director, please allow me to introduce Antonio. He is intimately familiar with our menu and our wine cellar. I know he can help you choose something perfect to complement your dinner."

"Signore, signora, how pleased am I to meet you," breathed Antonio in almost flawless English. "Liam has told me of your choices and I must say that you have chosen wisely. Both the prawns and the sole have been exquisite this season. Have either of you a particular wine in mind for your dinner?"

Dumbledore looked to Amelia, silently bidding her to speak first.

Bones accepted the unspoken challenge and replied, "We'll have a bottle of Blue Nun Riesling.

The old headmaster was a bit surprised. He expected her to accept the selection of a more complex Chardonnay than the popular German wine.

She gave a slight shrug and commented, "I've always liked it."

Dumbledore smiled at her as the somewhat disappointed wine-master walked off to let them begin their discussion. While a skilled politico in her own right to have punched through so many glass ceilings within the male-dominated Auror corps, she was refreshingly honest. He admitted, "I don't always have beer, but when I do I generally prefer the American Lager, Bud Light, myself."

During their very brief and unsuccessful attempt at small talk, Dumbledore was discreetly placing privacy charms around their small dining room as Amelia looked on. She wondered at some of his spellwork; as a law-enforcement professional she knew the charms for secrecy well. Still, some of his choices were fiendishly difficult. She wondered whether he was really that concerned with their confidentiality or merely showing off.

His casting complete, he began, "The sun is setting for me, Amelia. I find myself - how shall I put it..." he trailed off.

"Professor, everyone faces their own mortality at some time. You simply have a better idea as to the nature and timing of your fate," said the witch, herself no stranger to death as a result of her service.

Dumbledore countered, "Perhaps you misunderstand. It is not fear that troubles me. It is the sure and certain knowledge that I must leave much undone that bothers me. I must make the best of the time I have. I have been unsparingly separating the nice from the necessary. It is not enough; not nearly all of the necessary can be accomplished by mid-summer."

Amelia pondered a moment. Despite the frustrations Dumbledore brought her, his knowledge, skills, and insights had been brilliant far more often than flawed. What he considered necessary was likely valuable, indeed. The danger, Amelia saw, was his fixation on the greater good; he would think distant goals to be as necessary as destroying Voldemort or protecting her son. She set about leading him to eliminate the "necessary" items that didn't work to further Harry's prospects for survival.

Strategy decided, Amelia turned to tactics. She had to make the man focus on the critical time element. "How long are you trying to keep this..." looking pointedly at his missing left arm, "a closely held secret?"

"As long as I can," Dumbledore returned. "The truth could inspire questions that must not be asked lest they be answered."

Amelia was exasperated with the old man's stubborn pride, and it showed. "Professor, I hardly think that your reputation..." She got no further.

"Again, I have not been clear, Amelia," Dumbledore interrupted. I thought my errand a few days ago was a simple matter, well within my capabilities. I never counted on a muggle taxicab and the Statues of Secrecy costing me my arm."

Before Amelia could speak, he continued, "Now, I doubt even my ability to keep our conversation completely private in this well-visited restaurant. Surely you can understand an old man's desire to keep his foolish mistakes to himself?"

Amelia went silent, thinking hard. Dumbledore was telling her that despite his charm work, he was still concerned about eavesdropping. He repeated the fable about his "accident" and linked it to his arm in a way he knew that she knew was false. What was he really saying?

Then it hit her: If Riddle knew how Dumbledore had been injured, he might suspect one of his Horcruxes' defenses was responsible. While Riddle would be thrilled to know he had at last dealt a mortal blow to

his ancient adversary, he would have a very different kind of thrill at knowing that the secret of his immortality was broken.

He would immediately check the safety of the remaining Horcruxes. He would redouble the protections on the remaining ones. Connie and Anna might never get another clue were that to happen. Worse, she reckoned that they would get clues, but clues leading to lethal traps, not to soul fragments.

Her comprehension showed in her face and voice as she said, "Quite right, Professor. My apologies; I hadn't meant to bring that up. I perfectly understand your concerns and I assure you that I share them."

Dumbledore gave both a slight smile and a slight nod. "Thank you, Amelia. I appreciate your indulging me on this."

Amelia regrouped. Dumbledore had his shortcomings, and his pride would be protected by the fiction she had agreed to promote, but she knew he had it right. Riddle must not come to suspect his Horcruxes were being hunted. If that meant the legend of Dumbledore's infallibility survived a bit longer, she didn't mind.

But - she still had to keep Dumbledore focused on the tasks that would protect Harry. She soldiered on. "Can you not stop this Tournament? Surely the risks it creates and the burden it places on you are both unnecessary and distracting?"

Dumbledore lost the remnant of his earlier smile.

"No."

He continued, "A year ago, after Harry showed me the diary that he destroyed, the Tri-Wizard tournament was the best idea that I could think of to bring the key students from Durmstrang and the Beauxbatons Academy together with the students from Hogwarts. Now it has resulted in the death of a fine young man and has placed young Harry's life in even greater jeopardy than it usually is."



"Then why not simply cancel it," pressed Amelia. She expected him to refuse, but she couldn't understand why the Tournament was so important to him.

"Because, Amelia, it is part of the binding magical contracts at the core of the Tournament. The headmasters of the schools must take binding vows to complete the Tournament. I could not hope to contribute much to our cause were I to lose my magic."

Bones's eyes widened. "I had no idea the headmasters were so bound!"

"It is not widely known. It was done centuries ago to prevent schools withdrawing when defeat seemed certain. Beyond that, consider it to be Harry's first opportunity to meet witches and wizards from other nations on a peer basis, rather than simply as fans. In this instance, Igor had the opportunity of selecting the second of his choice, but he was bound to present another student to complete the final task."

Acknowledging his point, but remaining focused, Amelia suggested, "I understand your dilemma. Perhaps you should cut down on some of your other responsibilities. Gray from the States would do a fine job heading up the ICW."

The old chessmaster caught himself saying, "But he doesn't always see the..."

"Greater good? I think that is too narrow a view. Rather, I think he sees the greater good differently than you do. I place a much higher priority than you do on the rights of the individual, be it an individual witch or wizard or an individual nation. I believe that Gray sees the greater good as protecting freedom of choice, just as I do. With him leading the ICW, the United States will not get dragged into our civil war. That doesn't make him bad, either as a leader or a builder of bridges."

"But, Amelia..."

"No, Albus. You would only be changing a date on a calendar. Your time is short, as you yourself said. Someone else will lead the ICW

very soon now. You would be advancing that change of leadership by a mere few months. In return, Gray would know you selected him. That will give you a better chance to influence his thinking than if you force him to wait until you are gone, as well as give Gray more influence within the organization, as everyone will know that he's your choice."

Amelia could see the old mage was at least considering her point. She figured that if the argument worked once, it might work again. She pressed on.

"The same is true of the Wizengamot. You've wrangled the proxies of ten percent of the chairs - those with minors as their heads of houses. It's time to give those back to their rightful owners. They're the leaders of tomorrow."

That idea proved to be a harder sale. The old Professor countered, "They are still children, Amelia. You know the law; they cannot vote their seats until they are fourteen and even those that are old enough are too busy with their school to be distracted by the arm-wrestling of our politics. What would you have me do? I've relied on those votes to keep the ultra-conservatives at bay," declared Dumbledore with some passion.

Amelia wasn't giving up. "No doubt it seems so. Yet again it's a page or two on a calendar. None of them are ineligible to take their seats. They're mostly sixth and seventh year students now – Harry's the youngest. You should spend a few evenings with them, guiding them and introduce them at the next meeting. They will need to act, whether they are ready or not, lest Lucius offer to become their steward or mentor. The British wizarding world has fallen fifty years or more behind the continent, let alone the Americans. It's time to look forward."

Dumbledore wasn't giving up, either. "You still haven't answered the question, Amelia. If not me, then who? Votes come up all the time, as you know perfectly well. If the Riddle faction knew those votes were in play – or worse, abstaining until their rightful holders were ready to wield their voices and votes – we would see barbarism made law almost overnight."

Amelia returned, "By sheltering these houses from real decisions, you have left them impotent and dependent on you. Only one of those houses has no one left but the minor child - and that one is the Potter seat. All the rest have other family members who will be influencing the teen. Again, alive during the transition, you can mentor them. If you delay, then on your death, they have this burden dropped on them like an anvil! And it will come during times as dire as any we've ever seen!"

Dumbledore sagged at that realization. He knew she was right and he knew his pride was resisting the truth. He began to suspect that he would give in from a distance, after he had time to reflect. The truth, he knew, was that he should acquiesce right here, right now. He really didn't have the luxury of pondering the obvious.

He reflected on Gray, the plainspoken, crafty wizard who was heir apparent as Supreme Mugwump of the ICW. Amelia was probably right about his view of the greater good. And Gray wasn't an all-bad sort; he was muggleborn and very progressive in most of his views. He was just so confounded stubborn! Once he settled on a principle, he could only see it in clearly-defined terms. As Gray himself had said, he didn't like shades of grey. Dumbledore had given up trying to educate the man about the real complexities of life. According to Gray, "shades of grey are merely camouflage for lies and cowardice."

Gray had limited patience with certain foibles. In particular, he hated it when people asked questions and then got upset with a truthful answer. He hid that anger fairly well—unless one was a skilled Legilimens. Then he would simply look the offender dead in the eyes and remember the phrase, "if you don't want my peaches, don't shake my tree." Much time would pass before Gray would answer another question from such an offender.

It was that last adage that Dumbledore was presently struck by. He had invited Amelia to dinner, ostensibly to discuss priorities. He had, then shaken her tree, but not with any intention of taking her advice. Instead, he realized that he had really meant to set her priorities, as he had been hoping to offload some of his pet projects to her. But she had been right in focusing his thoughts on his own tasks. He had too

many. He had to cut back. The sand was running down inexorably. He had to separate the necessary from the vital.

He realized that Amelia had continued talking. It was time to gather peaches.

"Installing Fudge as a replacement to Millicent. Honestly, Professor, what were you thinking?"

Dumbledore winced. "You're right, Amelia. I underestimated the man's venality and overestimated his intelligence. But the options were significantly diminished after Barty's unfortunate experience with his son."

"True, but Diggory had an interest."

"Yes, but it seemed academic. Maybe Amos has the drive to do the job now. It didn't seem to me that he did then."

"You may have a point," Amelia conceded.

Dumbledore inquired, "What are your thoughts about carrying on the traditions of the school? Surely Minerva..."

Amelia broke in, "The real question is whether the Board of School Governors is happy with the current results or wants to move forward. Objectively, there are several areas that could easily be strengthened. History of Magic has become a joke while Muggle Studies hasn't moved forward in a hundred years. Dippet never accepted the Edwardian age and if he'd been king of the world, we'd still see the streets of London filled with horses and hansom cabs."

Dumbledore smiled to himself, recalling their charm and several romantic evenings of his youth. "Well," he said nostalgically, "hansom cabs weren't all bad, you know. But I don't know how the muggles endured the smell. Surely you'll put forth Minerva as your nomination for Headmistress?"

Amelia framed her answer for a moment as the old Headmaster refilled her glass and replied, "As a School Governor, I would endorse

her on an interim basis, but nothing longer. As a parent, I'd be highly inclined to ask for my children's opinions. Certainly she's a fine administrator, much like my Auror supply clerk, Nick Straighthand is in the DMLE. Is he good at what he does? Certainly. Is he a leader with vision? Absolutely not. From the reading that I've done, the school has thrived when it was under the leadership of a young witch or wizard that possesses leadership and vision. There are leaders and there are managers. Unfortunately, they're not the same talent. The school needs a leader with a vision for moving the curriculum ahead to meet the reality of the technological age that is exploding around us. The school needs a leader with a good eye for talent, who can coach the instructors to be inspirational in the classroom and improve their skills at transferring relevant knowledge to the students."

She didn't bother to bring up Minerva's weak performance with the Grangers, as they'd called Amelia back a day later for additional questions – obviously less than pleased with the transfiguration professor's answers. She took a sip of her water glass and continued. "We don't need the school to be a safe haven for endangered soothsayers or semi-reformed Death Eaters who have no inclination or ability to work with children."

She let out a breath that she didn't know she'd been holding. It hadn't been her intention to rip into the old Headmaster so hard – not really. She looked into his eyes and admitted, "I didn't mean to be so blunt, Headmaster."

Dumbledore adjusted his metal eyeglasses and acknowledged, "No, I'm certain that you didn't, but there was truth in your words. Do not let it ruin your evening. What else would you care to discuss or ask about?"

Amelia returned to the point as gently as she thought safe. "Albus, Minerva simply isn't a leader. She's a fine follower and a competent steward until the next leader is selected, but she'll never invent anything. The school has only ever thrived under the tenure of great leaders through its history. As a teacher and administrator, she excels. But honestly, can you see her defending the school should Riddle attack? Can you see her standing up to the Governors, as you

have had to do from time to time? You have all the portraits of your predecessors to compare her to. Does she measure up?"

Dumbledore shook his head sorrowfully. "No," he said slowly. "I cannot see her stopping Riddle or successfully sparing with the Governors. The person to do those things in my absence is not yet on the staff. And as much as I admire her, she is not likely to innovate. She would do some obvious things - the next Divination instructor will be a better teacher, for example. But I doubt she'd understand how badly the Muggle Studies program is needed, and even less how badly out of date it is. Neither is she likely to do away with Divination, despite its inherent unteachability."

Amelia brightened, "I agree. I will do all I can to protect her in her current role, but I will not support her as headmistress. I heard a muggle saying I liked: Think outside the box. Please do that; tell me who you would like as headmaster of the school, political issues aside."

"Flores Fortesque."

"Why? He's a shopkeeper, not an academic," Amelia objected.

"True, but he loves the age group for one thing. He can converse with young people easily and on an exceptionally broad range of subjects. He is the most well-read wizard I've ever met on history. And his ice-cream business owes its existence to muggle technology; they invented ice cream. He learned how their machines work and then found magical ways to duplicate the process. He has a good grip on the muggle world as a result. And he is an innovator - look at how he uses his superb Potions background to develop his amazing flavors! He is an exceptionally rare person in our world. He might be willing to serve a three-year term."

Amelia nodded, impressed at Dumbledore's analysis. "Do you think he could help introduce muggle technology to the curriculum? I think seeing how inventive muggles can be would do much to reduce the tendency to see them as almost subhuman and unimportant."

Albus smiled, "Yes, I do. And I agree. The muggle cell phone is an astonishing bit of work. If I hadn't had someone explain them to me, I might have thought they were magic!"

Amelia continued, "Yes, I know what you mean. We have begun using them and they have been invaluable. Mine helped save Harry's life last summer, you know. And there have been many other cases where owls would have arrived far too late to save lives."

"But it isn't just their communications that are amazing. We think we are wonderful because we can put a witch or a wizard on a broom and they can fly across a county. muggles put hundreds of people into flying machines and fly them across oceans! And a single muggle can farm unbelievable amounts of land! Far more than a wizard can!"

Dumbledore agreed, "They have truly progressed at a much faster rate than we have. Unfortunately, many of their advances are of a terrifying nature."

"You refer to their weapons?" asked Amelia.

"Yes," replied Dumbledore. "I worry whether knowing just how dangerous muggles have become might make Riddle's hate-driven platform seem prudent. Some people would strike at muggles out of fear of being discovered and attacked."

"I know," agreed Amelia. "But you and I know that there are just too many muggles for any conceivable magical attack to cope with. And the counterattack from them would be catastrophic. It would end our world forever. I think wider knowledge of muggles and their strength will lead the sane to realize we must be cautious - and courteous - in our dealings with them."

"Once you start talking about dealing with muggles, you are beyond a headmaster's span of control, Amelia. As poor a state as you may believe Hogwarts is in, I believe it is far ahead of the hidebound mass of reactionaries we call a Ministry for Magic."

It was Amelia's turn to wince. It wouldn't do to forget that the mortally wounded relic before her was Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and

intimately aware of the failings of the government they both helped to run.

"We've looked backwards at Ministers, Professor. Who do you see looking forward?"

Dumbledore gave her a shrewd, penetrating look. "Not you, Amelia. Unless I am very mistaken, you see the job as a curse. As with Diggory when Bagnold was leaving, I think you are interested in the job, but not ambitious for it. I believe you would hate it within a few days. While it sounds somewhat tawdry, a really effective Minister must, among other things, genuinely desire to be a really effective Minister. You, I think, want to be a really effective Director of Magical Law Enforcement."

Amelia found herself nodding. "Too right, Albus, too right. But someone has to do it. I'd rather it not be me, but it must be someone. Fudge will be our ruin if we do not rid ourselves of him very soon."

"Agreed. Tom is forcing our hand in ways I doubt he intends. I do not imagine he wants to deal with an effective Minister. That has unfortunate implications for the person who meets our needs."

Hufflepuff Amelia hated to admit it, but she knew Dumbledore was right about that. An effective Minister would be a target of the most ruthless killers she knew of.

"It sounds like a job for a Gryffindor," Amelia said. "And I might just know the person who could pull it off."

Try as he might, Dumbledore couldn't imagine to whom Amelia could be referring. Intrigued, he confessed, "I surrender, Amelia. Who is your candidate?"

Amelia related the relevant parts of the strategy discussion she, Rufus, Connie, and Anna had had, pointing out the insightful positions and policies Rufus had put forward.

"Connie, Anna, and I are not easily sold, Albus, but I think all three of us would vote for him on the platform he was outlining."



"I could see myself supporting the man behind those words myself, Amelia," concurred Dumbledore. "Although I think we need to keep our eyes open, both to how he might change as Minister and to other possible candidates."

Silently she wondered if her dinner companion would be alive to see a new Minister of Magic.

He continued, "However, there is one issue on which I must be certain. Our world is dying from within. We drive most of the muggleborns out altogether; the Ministry reminds me of the American South not all that long ago. Persons of a certain heritage were simply excluded from any serious role above that of menial labor. Yet as we discussed, the muggles thrive on challenges and find the most ingenious ways to attack problems. We must find a way to keep the likes of Miss Granger in our world or there will be very little left for Riddle to rule in a few short years."

Amelia nodded, thinking of the recent conversations that she had with Hermione's parents. "I couldn't agree more, Professor. As I've come to know Harry, his viewpoint has often astonished me. At first I didn't realize how much of his approach to life was influenced by his muggle upbringing until this year - but one cannot get to know Harry without getting to know Hermione Granger. She's a force of nature. Losing her to the intolerance of the system would be a devastating blow."

"And how does Rufus see the muggleborn?"

"I've never had the first suspicion that he has any elitist attitude, Albus, but I will certainly sound him out on it. I'll try to see whether Harry has had any inkling of a bias in that area, too. They spend a lot of time together."

"Good idea, Amelia. Please share what you learn with me," asked the aged mage. "Now that you've brought Harry into the conversation, I think we need to dwell on him for a moment. I know we agree that the prophecy is a curse, mainly because Riddle seems to believe it - or the part we know he knows so implicitly. Whether the prophecy is true

almost doesn't matter, because Tom will keep seeking to destroy Harry lest he be vanquished by him."

"I have one objective only when it comes to Harry," said Amelia firmly. "I will keep him alive. Despite this Tournament, despite the Death Eaters, despite Riddle - despite Hell itself, I will keep my son alive!"

Impressed by her resolve, Dumbledore replied, "Then I need more time with him. Harry is remarkably resourceful, but he has too few resources to call on. We simply must give him a wider arsenal of spells to work with."

She took off her monocle and uttered a single word. "No."

"No? How can you reject that? It is self-evident!"

"No, it isn't. Harry doesn't need a hundred ways to kill Riddle. He needs one way that works one hundred percent of the time. If you wish him to know of a score of ingenious ways to dispatch the Dark Lords of the future, will him your pensive and a hundred memories in sealed vials. What he needs this month is one way that will work for him."

She felt that Harry's training with Rufus had gone well so far, and she didn't want to inject more distractions or stress into his life.

Dumbledore leaned back, thinking deeply. Amelia had a point; Harry's quiver of spells had to be tailored to his survival. And thanks to Riddle's faith in the prophecy, that meant he had to have a sure thing, a positive method of sending Riddle on to the next leg of his journey. Still, Amelia had overlooked one vital thing.

"You are quite right, Amelia. As far as Riddle goes, Harry does need to find only one way to deal with him."

Amelia was nobody's fool. She waited for the other shoe to fall.

And down it came. "But Riddle seldom leads in his confrontations. He will act as he did in the last war, sending his Death Eaters in first – more so, given the effect of the loss of some of his items. Harry will

need at least some tactical training and all the help he can get to survive such a battle. You know too well that even trained Aurors with a full complement of NEWT DADA spells and advanced Auror training fared poorly in such fights."

Amelia flinched at that, knowing it was right. There were only two choices - either Harry had to be pumped full of combat training and turned into a walking, talking weapon, or somehow, they had to shape the battle and the battlefield so that Harry was never unsupported or left facing such a scenario alone. Both were daunting tasks. It would take some careful thinking to shape the right strategy. "Harry will find a way. I repeat: I will keep him alive. No Slytherin was ever more cunning, no Gryffindor more brave, no Ravenclaw brighter, and no Hufflepuff ever worked harder than I will be to protect my son."

Dumbledore was not easily impressed. He had seen the blackest of evil in Grindelwald and Riddle. He had seen Harry's strength, courage, conviction and compassion in towering amounts, too, and the determination coming from the Director across the table was a palpable, tangible force. He almost pitied Riddle.

"It will not be easy, Amelia," cautioned the old warrior for Light. Harry certainly has power, but he currently lacks concentration and focus. He is still so very young - the sprint is his, but the long race is still beyond him. I know that he cannot yet sustain the Bubble Head charm, for example. His survival against his foes may well require such sustained spellwork. I only hope he gets enough time to grow into his full power."

"I keep telling you, Albus - I. Will. Keep. Harry. Alive. There is almost nothing I would not do to protect him. But you haven't mentioned another worry of mine - what is Harry after Riddle is gone? What becomes of the Boy-Who-Lived when he becomes the Man-Who-Vanquished? We are a society of idol worshippers, and Harry hates being idolized."

Dumbledore frowned, saying, "It is a real problem, Amelia. I may have erred in placing Harry with his muggle relations, but I could see even then that he would be ruined by the attention he would get if

raised openly by wizards. He has been angry with me for keeping things from him, but I have wanted him to have as much of a childhood as he could. Now, as an educator, I remember Pope: 'Tis education forms the common mind; just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.' I had hoped Harry could have a regular education. I think we must agree that is not possible anymore. However, if Riddle were to regain his body this afternoon and return as Lord Voldemort, you could buy Harry weeks or months by arresting all of the known Death Eaters."

Amelia was near tears and could only nod her assent. Gradually she regained control enough to move the subject onto something less agonizing. "We have run into a dearth of leads on our searches, Albus. Have you any new insight you can share?"

Dumbledore gazed with no trace of twinkle in his sad, blue eyes as he responded, "No. I've wracked my brains for ideas we haven't shared. I'm sure that when we finally discover the missing pieces, we will all look back and say, 'Of course! It's so obvious!' But that will be the keen eye of hindsight. Here, now, today, I have nothing new to offer. Well, one small thing you probably have seen yourself. It will have some significance to him. He could have used a common stone dropped down a well and been virtually untouchable. But unless I miss my guess, he won't change his spots. Significant things in significant places and trusted servants are his pattern and he will stay with it. The trick is to keep quiet about the search."

Amelia nodded, "Connie has come to the same conclusions. We really need two strategies. One is a way of dealing with a stronger Riddle until we find the locket. If Harry were lucky enough to defeat him, he would still linger in spirit form until he found a way back or the locket was destroyed. The other is defeating a weaker, mortal Riddle after the locket is destroyed. As you mentioned, in either case, he will keep his Death Eaters in front of him when it is time to do battle."

Dumbledore knew that there was nothing more to say about defeating Tom at the moment. He observed, "The largest potential threat facing you this week is Lucius Malfoy. He has the influence and gold to finance a war against you. Your best move would be to find a way to keep him out of the war."

Bones replied, "It wouldn't be my preference to kidnap his son and hold him as a hostage, though there certainly would be those who would do so if asked."

"Scrimgeour might point out to him that he would have little to gain and much to lose by participating in another war. There are those who would never accept his usual claim of being forced to act while under the Imperius curse."

Amelia nodded and replied, "Speaking of those with much to lose, you would do well to advise Snape that he has shelter until your passing. Reformed or not, his bill for participating in the Potters' deaths is coming due very quickly."

The old Headmaster concluded that he would never change her mind and acknowledged the truth of her words with a nod. Severus may have truly reformed, but his unpleasant attitude and blatant favoritism would be his undoing.

He concluded, "I will revise my Will one last time. I do have several items for Harry and will try to give them to him in the next few weeks. Should Florian actually accept the job, Harry would be my first choice as his eventual successor. I believe that our conversation for the evening has concluded. I appreciate your candidness. When will you call for a vote of no-confidence?"

"Immediately after the third task or when Riddle had made his first public move, whichever is sooner."

Dumbledore replied, "Fate willing, I will do what I can to aid your effort. Goodnight, Amelia."

"Goodnight, Albus."

As they parted ways and left, one of the busboys sent an owl to Lucius Malfoy informing him of the visit.

... --- ...

Sunday 2 April

Minerva happened across Harry and Susan who had been outside quite early in the morning jogging and doing exercises and offered to walk them back to their common room. She opened the door and climbed in.

"Miss Johnson, Mr. Weasley, Miss Spinnett, and Mr. Weasley! What are you doing?"

"Celebrating Fred and George's seventeenth birthday, Professor."

"We had to do what we could," explained Fred as Angelina made a passable attempt to cover herself.

As Alicia buttoned her jeans, George added, "We let Mother Nature do the rest."

Hermione happened to walk down the stairs, seemingly horrified at what she saw. Fred was mistakenly putting George's trousers on. She exclaimed, "But you're barely seventeen!"

"And they're barely dressed," observed Susan, who had a wicked smirk on her face.

"Enough," remarked McGonagall, who'd seen quite enough by the fireplace light. "I never..."

"I reckon that's part of the problem," smirked Lee Jordan to himself, swinging his dreadlocks as he and Katie Bell walked out the portrait door holding hands on their way to an early breakfast.

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Saturday 11 April

Riddle listened as Pettigrew and Barty went back and forth on the details of the plan to snatch Potter from the third task. The Quidditch pitch was outside of the Anti Portkey wards of the castle, so in the event that Potter failed to reach the cup, Barty could simply grab him.

If possible, Riddle wanted to avoid that alternative. As he'd found with Pettigrew, supposedly dead servants were uncommonly loyal, as they had no other distractions and no one was looking for them. The old fool had failed to convince anyone that Wormtail was alive, or Black innocent. The deception with Crouch Senior was working better than his wildest dreams. The Weasley boy was such a fool, blinded by ambition and misplaced loyalty.

Junior's only concern was his inability to get an opportunity to examine the cup for existing enchantments and wards. Dumbledore had placed it in a most conspicuous spot at the front of the trophy room where people walked by on a constant basis. He'd just have to find a way.

Riddle dismissed the two, saying, "Well done my faithful servants. We shall soon prevail and you both shall be well rewarded."

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While Riddle was briefing his servants, Stephen Nott waited at his table at the Stirring Stick until his dinner companions arrived. Morris hadn't greeted him with the same level of enthusiasm that he had when the Hogwarts Headmaster or the DMLE Director had recently dined with him, but the service was still well above average. Nott didn't possess quite as sanitary a reputation as Lucius did, and Morris knew better than to intentionally offend a man whom he believed had relieved a dozen people of their lives.

A few minutes later, Macnair came in with Malfoy. Morris involuntarily shuddered at the sight of them. Mr. Malfoy was a powerful, dangerous man and Mr. Macnair was the Ministry Executioner. Morris had overheard more than a few stories that Mr. Macnair had occasionally used his professional skills on a moonlighting basis for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, before he disappeared.

Morris put on his best face and greeted the two men. "Good evening, Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Macnair. It is an honor to see you here. How may I help you?"

Macnair replied, "We're dining with Stephen Nott. We'd prefer not to be bothered any more than needed." He'd spoken the words without a greeting. There was no sense of request, rather a command, like he'd give to one of his house elves.

"Of course, Sir. This way, please." He led them to an out of the way table next to the wall. When they were seated, all of the men seemed to be facing outward or sideways, as if, out of longstanding habit, none of them wanted their back to the door. Malfoy gave a slight sneer when, out of turn, Macnair ordered a bottle of Johnny Blue for the table. He preferred his favorite single malt, Oban to the blend, but said nothing as Macnair poured them each a generous glass. They all ordered steaks.

If they were short with Morris, they were brutal with Antonio, the chatty wine-master. Macnair transfigured him into a bottle of cheap Chianti, stuck the bottle on a shelf and calmly stated that he'd whack off the bottle neck with a cleaver and pour the contents down the toilet if they were bothered again during their stay.

Nott gave a slight cringe. It never paid to make enemies for no reason. When Morris was done apologizing and had gone, he stated, "The Mark has been changing since the World Cup. One week it's back, then it got a lot darker, and then it seemed lighter. There's no doubt in my mind – he's out there someplace and sooner or later, he'll come calling."

Macnair observed, "Borgin's brother, Tim took his family to Argentina last week. I don't expect he'll be back. On the other hand, Thomas is so excited, you'd swear it was the second coming of Slytherin himself."

Lucius was silent as he refilled his glass with the amber liquid. Tim had made a small fortune in recent years raising and selling mokeskin products. With sufficient breeding stock, he could replicate his business far enough away to safely ignore any call that he might receive. The younger Borgin had lost most of his holding supporting the Dark Lord and escaping the long arm of the Aurors. Malfoy was certain that he didn't want to lose his life's savings a second time.



Nott remarked, "Wallace did the same. He sold his livestock and moved to New Zealand. He said almost the same words – he'd given two sons and twenty years of hard work to the Dark Lord and got nothing back. He told me that he refused to be a piggy bank for the son of a muggle - not that I believe that bit to be true, myself."

Like the others, Malfoy had read the same article. He'd seen a lot of half-bloods try to improve their supposed heritage over the years by selectively including or excluding ties to various family members. Certainly Riddle was no name of an Ancient or Noble family, least of all in Britain. He kept his opinions to himself, drained his glass and took his leave. His father had been one of the Dark Lord's original benefactors in the '50s. Lucius thought it was too bad that his father hadn't done his due diligence. Malfoy imagined that if the Dark Lord came back, he'd be hungry – hungry for supporters and hungry for gold. Auckland had never seemed so desirable a place to be, or so very impossible to get to. Any way he thought about it, he was trapped. The Dark Lord would never let him leave.

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"Nudity, product placements, loose ends and blatant disparaging of school staff! Why do you insist on breaking the rules, Mr. Crow?" She'd given him chance after chance and he continued to flaunt the rules of reporting that she'd so clearly laid down all those years ago. It was obvious that he deserved another detention.

Having just finished a late fall ride, the old scribe was in far too good of a mood to be bothered. He could see the winter storm that was gathering and had enjoyed a great afternoon visiting his favorite still water pub.

As he rode off, Crow thought about the other gathering storm, and knew that his reports would describe more bloodshed. Sometimes, it couldn't be helped. He also wondered what the dentists would do when they found out. Perhaps one of the other scribes or readers knew. He hoped to hear from them

Speaking of second chances, McGonagall noticed an arithmetic formula ending with 4776013 on the table. She decided to look it up as she plotted her revenge on the old scribe.

McGonagall wondered what the other scribe's thoughts were regarding the Grangers. She hoped that they would let her know before Crow returned.

## Chapter Sixteen

### The Third Task

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Friday 2 June

About three weeks before the third task, Harry had asked Amelia to borrow one of the pensives for an evening and she'd sent him a note back stating that she'd drop it off that afternoon. She didn't mention that Dumbledore had one in his office and would be more than happy to visit with him. She waited outside of the Great Hall and met him as he was walking out with Susie and Hermione.

Susan saw her first and practically knocked her over, racing to her and colliding with a giant hug, "Auntie!!!"

After untangling herself from her ever-more beautiful niece, she replied, "Hello Susie, hi Harry, hello Hermione."

Susan inquired, "What are you here for, Auntie?"

Amelia looked at Harry, who shook his head slightly and she replied, "Harry asked to borrow something."

Hermione looked at the shallow stone basin covered with runes and remarked, "Is that a pensieve? I've read about them. Is that a regular model or the projection kind? The book I read told all about them. They're supposed to be really hard to make. I was thinking of trying to make one this summer."

Amelia smiled indulgently and replied, "Yes, normal, yes, and I think it would be a fantastic project for you to try. Harry, I'll be by tomorrow morning at 7:30 to pick it up. I'll meet you right here."

Correctly sensing that Harry wanted to talk with Auntie alone for a minute. Susan tugged on the other girl's sleeve and said, "Come on, Hermione. Let's go to the library."

Harry's best friend gave him a pleading look for a moment. She really wanted to be included in what would obviously be 'an interesting conversation', but she quickly gave in. After they left and the hallway had cleared a bit, Amelia stated, "I know you didn't go to the trouble of borrowing this to replay home movies of Quidditch matches. What's up?"

Harry replied, "I want to show the other champions what happened in the lake."

Amelia was silent for a moment and observed, "Harry, there are other people who would appreciate being able to see what happened – Professor Dumbledore, Alastor..."

"No," blurted Harry. "They can look some other day. This is for... us."

She smiled, knowing that he finally felt like he was a member of the group of School Champions, and replied, "I understand, Harry. I'll see you here tomorrow at 7:30."

"Okay. Bye."

As he turned and walked away carrying the stone basin, she softly said, "I love you, Harry."

Hearing her, Harry smiled.

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An hour later, Harry closed the door to the classroom that he had borrowed after Peter ran out. The younger Krum had been so proud of his brother's achievements. He simply hadn't been ready for what he'd just seen, despite Harry's introduction to the subject and warning that it would be brutal.

Cedric was thinking, 'We couldn't see a thing down there. Potter's gillyweed solution worked much better than our Bubble Head charms'. He would have said something to compliment Harry, but after Krum ran out, the moment had been lost.

Fleur was tempted to go after the teen, but Harry said, "Wait!" He felt the urge to explain this aspect of his situation with them. He bit his lip for a moment while the older teens waited for their younger colleague to collect his thoughts. He began, "I was entered into this..." He struggled a moment with the words and resumed, "I was entered into this contest by an as yet unknown agent of Lord Voldemort. Krum's death had nothing to do with that. It was just an accident, but I wanted you to know, so... you can keep your eye out for..."

The silver haired blonde and the hometown hero both looked at the skinny teen, who'd managed to best their efforts in two events, with rapt attention. Diggory coaxed, "What is it, Harry?"

Harry screwed up his courage and replied, "I'm pretty sure that he'll find a way to try to kill me in the third task. I don't know how, but if you happen to see a rat running around anywhere, blast it."

Fleur finally believed him and stated, "You didn't enter your name in the tournament. No?"

"No. I wanted nothing to do with it. I still don't."

His thoughts were so very different from hers, as she was a very competitive person. She countered, "But you could win... The fame... The glory..."

He shook his head, a bit frustrated with her words and replied, "I don't need it and I don't want it. I'd rather be just Harry."

Cedric replied, "I understand Harry. Stay safe and remember..."

They both shouted, "Constant vigilance." Seeing what they'd done, they laughed together. They visited together for another hour, getting to know each other as people, rather than opponents. They each promised to watch out for each other in the third task and help each other if needed.

... --- ...

Friday 9 June

Albus insisted on maintaining his routines as much as possible, given his circumstances.

The Lipid poison that he'd absorbed from the ring was quite a nasty creation. Effectively, it clotted the blood at a gradually increasing rate. To counteract the clotting, the only available treatments were blood thinners. Eventually the clotting aspect would become so severe that the victim would either die of a stroke, disintegrated blood vessels, or cut himself and bleed to death.

To date, the old Headmaster had avoided the third fate and was patiently awaiting the arrival of one of the other two.

He had not announced his 'retirement' yet and as far as he knew, none of his staff except Severus and Poppy had any reason to believe that anything would change. Thus he found himself presiding over his Friday afternoon staff meeting. Old habits tended to die hard. He opened the meeting with a variation of the same question that he had asked for nearly four years. – "Has anything unusual happened with Harry this week?"

Flitwick replied, "He showed Cedric and Fleur what happened in the lake."

Dumbledore inquired, "How did they react?"

Filius replied, "I believe it was therapeutic for all of them. I'm sorry that Viktor's younger brother, Peter decided not to stay. I believe he would have found the discussion that they had afterwards to be beneficial."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully, and added, "Alastor and Severus – I would ask that the two of you take the cup out to the center of the maze a few hours before the third task. Alastor, please use your formidable skills when you are done delivering it to check for any sort of jinxes."

Moody nodded and replied, "It'll be just right when the third task starts. Just to be certain, I'll take an extra look at it in the next day or two."

Dumbledore nodded, relieved that the important task had been properly delegated. He continued, "Here is the menu for the next week."

Junior smiled to himself as he limped back to his quarters. He briefly considered giving the real Moody another bottle of brandy for all of the help that he had unwittingly provided to his Master.

... --- ...

While Barty Crouch Jr. was considering his treatment of the captured Auror, Amelia was holding her Friday afternoon meeting with her senior staff. Hoping to remove Fudge from office while she still could count on Dumbledore's support, she planned on introducing the No Confidence vote at the regularly scheduled Wizengamot meeting to be held Monday 26 June. She explained that her logic was that Fudge would be in a stronger position to rally support if she called for a special meeting; which would require a stated agenda and at least a thirty-six hour notice. If she had the votes, she could simply introduce the No Confidence motion as new business in the Monday meeting.

Connie disagreed, saying, "You've already gone out on a limb for enough with the extra training and equipment. Let someone else do the lifting for a change. Rufus can't, since he'll need you to nominate him and will not want to be seen as being an instigating party. I'll make the motion."

Amelia was stunned. She hadn't been fishing for support; rather simply informing the other three of her plans. She asked, "Connie, are you sure? You'd lose your job if it failed."

"Aye. I'll take the risk, same as you would. Besides, with the Death Eaters starting to jump ship, one good nudge and the greedy little pig will probably be happy to run before he gets roasted. It's a good plan. We'll try it."

Amelia absent-mindedly stared at the calendar on the wall. June would certainly turn out to be an interesting month.

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Saturday 17 June

Scrimgeour handed Harry another butterbeer and asked him to sit down. Since the start of November, he'd been teaching him new skills and sharpening the ones that he already had. Objectively, the teen was Auror-level competent within a very narrow range of skills. Offensively, he could execute a very powerful blasting hex and quite a wicked cutting charm on multiple targets. Either could easily be deadly if not properly defended. More importantly, he possessed quickness, the ability to think on his feet and a high degree of situational awareness.

Defensively, he could cast a very competent shield. More importantly, he possessed the practiced quickness and agility to get out of the way of a spell headed in his direction. If the old Auror found himself in a serious situation with Death Eaters, he'd feel comfortable having the teen by his side. Objectively, what Potter made up for in quickness, accuracy and raw power, he lacked in terms of knowing a wide variety of spells. Scrimgeour was comfortable with that trade-off; given that Potter was just fourteen. Something told him that in six years, Potter would either be a battle hardened veteran who was comfortable leading others, or dead.

As the teen caught his breath after being fired at for nearly a half-hour, Rufus asked, "What did they tell you about the third task?"

Harry replied, "Mr. Bagman explained to us that they had converted the quidditch pitch into a maze of some sort. He told us that our task would be to work our way through the maze and get by the obstacles that we encounter. Apparently, I'll go in first, a few seconds ahead of the others." He thought for a moment and added, "That's about it, I reckon."

Scrimgeour suggested, "The obstacles that you're likely to encounter will, for the most part, be creatures that Hagrid will supply – Acromantulas, Blast-Ended Skrewts and the like. The maze also has some secret doors, so-to-speak. When you walk into the maze, you'll



get to the first intersection where you'll see paths going to the right or left. Stick your wand into the hedge as if you were going straight. It'll open for a few seconds just like the doorway to Diagon Alley. When you get in, go right until you get to the next intersection and go right again. You'll run into a sphinx. She will ask you a question. Don't say anything until you know the answer. If you answer wrong, she will attack and you'd have your hands full. If you don't know the answer, turn around and walk away. Come back a minute later and try it again. She will ask a different question every time. That's the easiest way through the maze."

Harry asked, "What about the other two paths?"

Scrimgeour replied, "If you go right at the first intersection, you'll eventually face three Acromantulas and three Skrewts. They're spelled not to leave a certain area, so they won't wander off into the rest of the maze. You can kill them, or try to get by them, but I wouldn't recommend it."

Harry asked, "What happens if you go left?"

Scrimgeour shook his head and observed, "Going to the left could get you killed. The major obstacles are a charmed cloud that is designed to disorient you for a few minutes and several sections of Devil's Snare. If you trip after the effects of the cloud while going past that stuff, or happened to lose your wand, you'd be a goner. Both paths eventually meet up on the other side of the Sphinx, where there is one Acromantula that is in the general area of the cup."

"Brilliant," muttered Harry, not thinking that any of the paths were all that great.

Scrimgeour took another two bottles of butterbeer out of the bucket, opened them and handed one to the teen.

"Thanks," replied Harry.

"Here," announced Rufus. "This is for you." He handed Harry a large package, wrapped in thick, brown paper.

Harry took it, and with Scrimgeour's coaxing, opened it. The package contained a sleeveless, black, heavy-leather vest and a pair of black trousers made of the same thick material. Harry ran his hand over the vest. It wasn't exactly smooth, but had obviously been finished with great care. He looked at the grey-haired wizard who had spent so much of his free time helping him and replied, "Thank you, Rufus, I don't know what to say."

Scrimgeour replied, "They're the same as what Amelia was able to get for each of the Aurors – Ironbelly. Connie, Anna and I each chipped in and bought you a set. Wear it as often as you can without being seen. It will seem quite stiff at first, but it will come to feel like a second skin. It's charmed to fit snugly and will stretch as you grow. Since you don't want anyone seeing the trousers, get a pair of those loose jeans that are the style these days. Just do me a favor and don't wear them half-way down your arse like those morons that you see on Carnaby Street."

"I won't. I promise."

"Good. One more thing, Harry. If you run into a serious situation, do what you can to make it right. Get names, descriptions and the like, if you can. You don't have to fight every bad guy that's out there. Remember the first rule of being a good Auror – do what you need to in order to go home at the end of your shift. Do what you can to help your partners, but ultimately, they're responsible for themselves."

Harry nodded and Scrimgeour finished his talk. "You're good to go with the spells that we've worked on. If you get into a serious situation, don't be afraid to fire. Carry your spare wand. No one would expect that someone your age would have one. Keep one of those portkeys that Amelia made for you with you. You never know when it will come in handy."

"I will, Sir."

"You're a good man, Harry. Take care of yourself. I'll be cheering for you."

"Thanks."

"You'd better get back to school now. I'll see you later."

... --- ...

While Harry and Scrimgeour were practicing, Junior was standing in the trophy room examining the Tri-Wizard Trophy. It had taken him dozens of trips to the room before he finally found it empty. The students seemed to find it to be a good place for a quick snog. Worse yet, Filch's nasty cat seemed to have an unnatural attraction to the room. He pointed his wand at the trophy and muttered, "Enchantas Revealus." There was an unusual collection of spells on the cup – one to prevent breakage of the crystal trophy, one to prevent coating any sort of poison on the handles, anti-summoning and anti-tracking charms.

He quickly cancelled the revealing charm when he heard footsteps. It was the Junior Healer, Susan Florman walking by on the way to lunch. He'd seen her a few times recently and looked her over once. She had nice tats and the curtains matched the carpet. She continued walking and he recalled the advice that his Master had given him. 'A two-way portkey charm would be the hardest to detect. Keeping it in mind, he felt that nothing could go wrong. His Master was certain that Potter was being coached. Someone was bound to tell the boy about the hidden door in the maze. The other ways would take significantly longer for anyone else to go through.

It really left little to chance. His plan was to roam along the outside of the maze and cast a Confundus charm on the other champions if necessary.

... --- ...

Severus Snape seethed as he observed Potter muddle through a blood restorative draft. He felt that everything that had ever gone wrong in his life could either be traced back to the brat or his arrogant father. The little brat looked just like his father and he got away with rule-breaking wherever he went.

To further ruin his day, the Headmaster told him that he would likely be dismissed at the end of the year. Snape was certain that Potter was at the bottom of that disaster too.

He silently raged at the teen as he did a poor job stirring what should be an easy-to-make potion – filthy hair and eyes that he didn't even deserve to have.

It was at that point that something within the vindictive Potions Master snapped, and Severus Snape made a life-changing decision.

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Wednesday 21 June

Master Auror (Ret) Alastor Moody knew that the little bastard impersonating him was up to no good. No doubt he was hatching some sort of plot either at the school or Ministry, since that would have been the only logical reason to snatch him. He hadn't felt the trunk move, so he'd most likely been in the same place all year. What he did know was that once every thirty days Barty's supposedly long-dead son harvested another clump of his hair.

For years Moody told new recruits that one of the attributes of a true Auror was never to give in. He'd been sheered five times since Junior had given him the bottle of brandy and told him Happy Christmas, so Moody guessed that it must be late May or early June by now.

Moody faced his last chance with neither bitterness nor enthusiasm. He had lived a long time and had weathered many storms. So while vigilance he knew paid off and lapses of vigilance were costly beyond words - bitterness was entirely a waste of his energy.

But enthusiasm for what would likely be his final effort was beyond him. In truth, he was dreading this. While no stranger to pain, this was really going to hurt.

He could delay no longer. It was now 29 days since the last haircut. It was time to put his plan in motion. It was necessary to delay as long

as possible, because the plan would rapidly cause his condition to degrade. Everything depended on deception.

In that, at least, Moody was content. He was Moody. He was deception.

Resolved, the old Auror dragged himself in the utter darkness in the direction of the ladder. He missed it on his first effort, but it wasn't like it could hide from him, even in the pitch black of the closed trunk. The room was, after all, only twelve feet to a side.

At length, he found the ladder. He groaned as he dragged himself upright using the rungs and his good leg.

Ever so slowly, he climbed.

Climbing a ladder isn't really too tough for most people, but a seventy-five year old who had been kept in detention for at least nine months, denied proper care and exercise, isn't most people. He could barely get on the first rung.

Yet Moody had to reach the top. He struggled upwards, his arms hooked through the rungs to prevent falling as he scrabbled for a foothold on the next rung with his good leg. After only two rungs he had to rest, sweat pouring off him and his heart racing with the unaccustomed exertion.

Again and again, Moody fought his way up another rung. Finally, dizzy, panting, and soaked in sweat, his head bumped the trunk lid softly. "Thank Merlin!" the old Auror wheezed, "only a couple more."

Moody was nearly six feet tall. The ladder was twelve. He needed every inch he could get of that twelve feet, so he paused, trying to get his breathing under control. He hoped to get two more rungs of height. He knew it would be desperately difficult.

As Moody pulled his body upward with his arms and pushed with his good leg, he did the first of the things he was so much dreading in this exercise in agony (and, he darkly muttered, probable futility, as

well): he rested his stump on the next highest run and put much of his weight on it.

Even magically healed stumps don't like that. Prostheses are designed to spread the weight all across the stump to prevent the very agony Moody was now forcing on himself. He bit down on his lip until it bled in his mouth to prevent his making any sound. Junior was due sometime soon, according to Moody's internal clock, and he mustn't be more suspicious than usual.

By arcing his torso sideways, using his stump to belay himself, and enduring the wracking pain, Moody eventually won his last two rungs. He now was suspended horizontally on the second rung of the ladder. He slowly bent his good leg, drawing his knee toward his chest. His opposite arm gripping the ladder, his stump holding him parallel to the rungs, he grasped his ankle with his free hand and held his heel against his backside, knee pointing down like an arrow.

And he let go.

It doesn't take long to fall ten feet, but it can feel like an eternity when you know what's going to happen when you hit.

The eternity of free fall quickly ended and the eternity of very real pain began. Moody had done it. He had managed to land squarely on his bent knee, the bulk of his body weight blasting the patella of his kneecap into fragments utterly unable to cushion his weary, weathered femur as it hit the unforgiving bottom of the trunk and snapped cleanly, like a dried on branch trodden on by a giant.

Merlin, that hurt!!!

If he could stop his sniveling, he angrily told himself, he had a very good chance of pulling his deception off.

Therein lay the cunning of his plan: Any hair taken from him now would visit his agony on his captor. He could sabotage the rat bastard's next batch of potion if he could keep his leg immobilized enough to keep quiet for the next day or so until the bucket with the scissors was again lowered to him.

He didn't have to wait long.

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Two hours later, Junior added the old coot's hair to what he hoped would be the last batch of this muck that he'd have to make. He finished bottling the thirty bottles and placed them in the rack next to the two others that were left from the last batch before filling his flask with the remainder from one of the cauldrons.

Finally he stowed the cauldrons into the closet and got ready for bed.

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Thursday 22 June

Junior got up and got dressed for the day. He'd missed breakfast, but that wasn't unusual. Chatting with the staff required wasting two doses and there was always the risk of someone bringing up some past event that he didn't know about. He'd covered up for those so far by simply ignoring the speaker and appearing rude. No one had said anything, so apparently it was within the old bastard's character.

With ten minutes until class started, he sat on the sofa with his spare leg and eye nearby and took a swig.

After ten seconds of screaming, Junior realized what had happened. That bloody bastard!!!

Barty Crouch Junior was no novice at handing out pain, but in all honesty, he'd rarely been on the receiving end. Effing A!!! That hurt. He cast a healing charm on his leg and a pain killing charm and sat for a few minutes, his real eye rolling as he winced through the pain.

After ten minutes, the charms had worked well enough, so he could get up, strap on the wooden leg and make his way to the sink. He emptied the muck out of his flask and rinsed it out as quick as he could. The healing charm that he'd cast did an adequate job on his

femur, but repairing the knee would take more time than he currently had. He opened one of the two good bottles and carefully poured half of the contents into the silver flask.

After carefully putting the flask into his trouser pocket, he slowly made his way to the classroom, knowing that he'd be uncharacteristically late. His only consolation as he slowly walked along, grimacing with every step, was the knowledge that the old bastard in the bottom of the trunk had no painkillers of his own. He'd deal with him after lunch.

He calculated that he had twenty-one good doses remaining. Seven hours of class Thursday and another seven on Friday would take most of his remaining supply. To make it to the tournament on Saturday, he either needed to hide out in his room more than usual, or suffer through the bad potion. He didn't know enough healing charms to truly fix Moody's knee and use purchased potion. However, if he had to continue the disguise for another month, he knew of no other alternative

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That evening, the young couple walked hand-in-hand, by the edge of the Black Lake. The extra daylight had arrived along with the warmer weather. There were quite a few students outside and Susan and Harry would greet them as they passed by. The lake no longer held the innocent allure for Harry that it once did, though he did enjoy the sound of the water lapping against the shoreline.

They sat down by a large beech tree, not knowing that it had been the same one where a generation ago, Harry's parents had proclaimed their love for each other. Susan could tell that Harry was in a reflective mood and didn't press him to talk. Instead, she drew circles on his wrist with her fingertips. After a while, she observed, "It will get pretty crazy around here in the next few days. Auntie told me that they expected half of the Ministry employees to show up Saturday."

Harry replied, "I don't know why. What will there be to see?"



Susan admitted, "I don't know, the hedge must be fifteen feet high. Even sitting in the stands, I doubt that anyone would be able to get more than a glimpse of your heads."

Harry added, "I expect that the first task would have been okay to watch, but there must have been nothing to see for the second one and this one doesn't seem any better."

Susan quipped, "So much for spectator sports. We'll get Auntie to take us to the Birmingham quidditch matches this summer. They'll be fun to watch."

"I suppose. Besides, I'll get to watch you in the pool. You can be my favorite spectator sport."

"That's so sweet." In a more serious voice she asked, "Harry, are you scared?"

He looked into her eyes and replied, "More resigned, if you know what I mean. Sort of like when people go and see Hermione's parents to get their teeth fixed. They know it's going to hurt and they know that they'll hate it, but they go anyway."

She sat thoughtfully for a moment and said, "Give me your left hand." She untucked the light sweater that she'd been wearing and placed his hand on her bare breast.

Harry gladly complied and basked in the soft warmth that she had offered him. A slight moan of delight was the only sound that he made as they sat side by side. After a few minutes of sheer delight for the both of them, she gave him a gentle push and promised, "I'll save them for you." She removed his hand and said, "Now kiss me properly. We need to go back in soon."

A while later, they got up and walked back to the castle as the last bits of light gave way to the darkness. As they walked along, Susan remarked, "I was reading a book the other day and found a clever saying for you. It goes, Promise me, you'll always remember – You're braver than you believe and stronger than you seem and smarter than you think."

Harry reflected for a moment and replied, "I like it. What's it from?"

"A little book by A.A. Milne." She pulled the small book out of her robe pocket and put it into his. Giving his hand a gentle squeeze, she remarked, "Take a look at it Friday night when you go to bed. It'll be way better than worrying."

"Thanks."

They parted ways after they walked into the castle and both had very pleasant, and remarkably similar dreams.

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Friday 23 June

Friday night before the third Task, after things quieted down in the common room, restful sleep eluded Harry. The only thing that kept running through his mind was the vision of the merman spearing the shark that looked as if it were about to attack Hermione.

Harry felt a cold sweat as he recalled watching Viktor slowly sinking to the bottom of the lake with the water billowing crimson.

Finally, he remembered the little book that Susan had given him. He opened it up to the page that she had marked and read, I think we dream so we don't have to be apart for so long. If we're in each other's dreams, we can be together all the time.

Smiling, Harry blew out the candle and dreamed about his mermaid – his strawberry blonde mermaid with the pretty blue eyes, a lovely smile and gorgeous breasts. The rest of the evening was very pleasant.

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Saturday 24 June

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At eight AM, Junior replaced the cap on his flask after taking another sip. He shook it side to side and determined that he had three or four swigs remaining. He only waited a minute or two until Snape arrived. He'd briefly considered casting the two-way portkey charm while the trophy was still in the display case, but decided that the tradeoff between having less chance of being suspected and Snape possibly noticing that the charm had been cast wasn't worth it.

For a moment, Junior had considered going against his Master's advice and involving Snape, but he concluded that the additional risk wasn't a good idea. It turned out to be a good decision, as they were met by the old headmaster, who was waiting by the great oaken doors. He greeted them, "Good morning, Severus, Alastor."

"Headmaster."

Dumbledore commented, "Naturally, you have both examined the cup for any signs of tampering?"

Snape replied, "Of course."

Dumbledore waved his wand back and forth in a sideways figure eight pattern and apparently was satisfied with the results. He added, "Alastor, when you go through the maze, please verify that the obstacles are all where they should be."

Junior nodded and replied, "Constant vigilance."

Snape shook his head at the old Auror's one-track mind and commented, "We'll be going now."

They walked together in silence. They entered the maze and Junior pressed his wand into the hedge at the first intersection. Five seconds later a passable sized entrance appeared.

Junior looked around. Through the hedges he could see the giant spiders, skrewts, a sphinx, clouds and Devil's Snare plants. He hoped that Potter had been coached as well as he had for the second task.

As they made their way further into the maze, they came upon the sphinx, which asked, "How many sides are there on a cube?"

Snape was about to say four when Junior answered, "Six."

As the sphinx let them pass. Snape admitted, "That was a close one. I had it wrong."

Ten minutes later, they had successfully dodged the final acromantula and reached the small clearing in the center of the maze.

They both knelt down and placed the cup in a blanket in the center of the clearing. Unnoticed by Snape, Moody's flask slipped out of his cloak pocket. They got up and made their way back out to the sphinx.

Junior made a show of looking for his flask and commented, "Damn."

Snape inquired, "What's wrong?"

Junior replied, "I must have dropped my flask when we set the cup down." He pointed to his torn cloak pocket.

Not wanting to go by the spider again, Snape called, "Accio Flask."

Junior shook his head and commented, "I have anti-summoning charms on all of my stuff. Keeps filthy Death Eaters from summoning me."

Snape offered, "I'll go get it."

Junior shook his head and replied, "Keep an eye open for that damn spider. I'll get it."

Snape was carefully watching for the boulder-sized spider that lurked nearby and didn't notice the blue flash from the clearing where the cup was hidden. Junior quickly caught up with him, and ten minutes later, they had escaped the maze.

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Harry and Hermione were enjoying breakfast together on the morning of the third task. She had encouraged him to eat a big breakfast by saying, "You'll probably skip dinner and have a light lunch, so you should fill up now."

Harry wisely took her advice. She passed him the platter of bacon and heard a thump as it accidentally hit him in the chest. She gave him a strange look and brushed her fingertip across the front of his shirt after he had put the platter back on the table. In a low voice, he explained, "Body armor."

For a moment, she was surprised by his answer, believing that it would only be available to law enforcement personnel, but then it made sense. She quietly inquired, "What about the others?"

He replied, "There's no policy either way, but I doubt it."

She was tempted to discuss parity for a moment, but was interrupted by Professor McGonagall, who stated, "Mr. Potter, your presence is requested in the Antechamber off of the Great Hall. Seeing her pleading look, she added, "Miss Granger, you may accompany Mr. Potter if you both would like. Good luck tonight, Potter."

They walked across the large dining area to the room where the Tri Wizard Champions first met. Through Harry's eyes, that day last October seemed ages ago.

Professors Dumbledore, Karkarov and Maxime were there. Dumbledore announced, "Your families were invited to come and spend the day with you. May I present Jaque and Appoline Delacour along with their daughter Gabrielle who are here for Fleur. Alex and Alexandria Karkarov are here for Peter. Amos and Florence Diggory are here for Cedric and Amelia and Susan Bones as well as Hermione Granger are here for Harry. The weather is wonderful today. I'd encourage you to enjoy the grounds and have a relaxing day. Lunch will be served in this room at one PM. Please enjoy your time together."

As the others were filing out, Amelia walked up to Dumbledore and inquired, "Professor, did you personally examine the cup for any nefarious spells?"

He replied, "I did just a half hour ago. Severus and Alastor brought the cup out together and each school has two professors standing guard at the entrance of the maze to ensure that no unauthorized people are allowed into the maze prior to the tournament."

She inquired, "Unauthorized personnel?"

In a low voice he replied, "Hagrid was allowed in to ensure that each of the creatures acting as obstacles within the maze had a sufficient supply of water." He continued, "At this point, nothing is amiss, I assure you."

When it came to the safety of her son, Professor Dumbledore couldn't convince her that water was wet, but in this specific case, she could find no fault in the double and triple checking that had taken place. She'd talk with Moody if she ran across him during the day and ask him to scam the maze once more before the start of the final task. She nodded, and mentioned, "I stopped in for ice cream yesterday. Thank you for the recommendation. It was lovely."

The old mage nodded back and replied, "There is much to be done. With your permission, I'll take my leave now."

As they walked outdoors, the four of them held hands, talking – but not about the fact that someone had died in the last event and that someone had gone to a lot of work to get Harry entered into the tournament. They walked through the immaculate gardens, which were beautiful, and in bloom. Harry silently wondered what his aunt would think if she were able to see them. A part of him was still amazed at the wonderful turn that his life had taken in the last year – being adopted into a wonderful, supportive and loving family.

Eventually Amelia asked, "Do you have all of your equipment?"

Forced out of his daydream, Harry replied, "Vest, trousers, boots, wand holder, spare wand and a Popsicle stick."

Amelia considered his answer for a moment and replied, "Don't forget to wear your glasses."

He was going to remind her that the glasses were redundant, since he'd had his eyes healed, but suddenly understood that she'd just reminded him of the optional eyewear features that he'd ordered with that particular pair of glasses.

Hermione asked, "Why weren't the other contestants given the same equipment?"

Amelia replied, "I have no knowledge or interest in what the other contestants were equipped with, or how they were coached. Bless his soul, Viktor didn't just happen to have learned how to completely transfigure himself into a shark. Karkarov probably worked with him for weeks to achieve that. I hope that Madam Maxime has taught Fleur every trick that she knows to get her through the final task. She'll never be the same after the burns that she suffered in her encounter with those damnable dragons."

She took a breath and tried to hold her emotions in check and added, "My point is, I simply don't care who wins. Harry didn't sign up for this. If he happens to win today and wins a sack of gold coins, so be it. If he feels guilty about it, he can give the money to St. Mungo's or give it to those two Weasley Twins so they can go prank the world. I don't care. I will do anything to protect my son."

Somewhat abashed, Hermione looked over to where she'd pointed and briefly envisioned Fred and George's Pranking Emporium selling Canary Creams by the dozen. Her initial smile faded slightly when she realized that Director Bones was more serious than she'd originally envisioned.

After an uncomfortable minute of silence, Amelia changed the subject and asked, "Did you find any resources to help you with your pensieve project?"

Hermione replied, "I found a book on charms and runes that I will need."

"How about the stone basin? You can't use a common bird bath."

The three women gave a laugh at that, as Harry wondered, 'why not?' especially if it would help make them more affordable.

Hermione admitted that she didn't have a source for the basin, but Amelia offered to help her find a stonecutter.

The Champions and their families all sat at a single table during lunch. It turned out that Mr. Delacour and Mr. Diggory both had very similar jobs at their respective Ministries. Cedric talked with Peter while Fleur visited with Susan. Amos sat next to Harry, who had Mrs. Delacour on his other side.

The older man commented, "Tis a shame that they've lost track of Sirius Black. I heard that he was sighted in Cyprus a while back."

Amelia watched carefully as Harry replied, "I heard that he'd been seen playing roulette in Las Vegas last week. I'm surprised that he wasn't rounded up." It was obvious to her that he was trying to avoid starting an argument with the boorish man. It was also evident to her that he'd been talking with Fudge or Dawlish, since her department was never officially notified that two Aurors had attempted to make an illegal capture.

Diggory was surprised by the news itself as well as the offhanded way that the Potter teen had mentioned it. He was tempted to pass on the tip to Dawlish, who'd told him about the Cypress sighting. Instead, he came back and replied, "What are your plans for the third event?"

Harry replied, "Just to get through it, Sir."

Taking another too large swig, Amos bragged, "My Cedric will come in first. I just know it. He beat you at Quidditch. He'll beat you at this."

Harry didn't want to start a fight with the man who'd had more brandy than food for lunch. Years of watching Uncle Vernon getting trashed on weekends had taught him that there was no benefit in discussing



anything with a drunk who was obviously looking for a fight. As such, he replied, "I hope he does well, Sir."

Amelia watched Diggory through a new lens and wasn't especially happy with what she saw. Amos would doubtless put his hat into the ring if Fudge were run out of town. Fortunately, before the conversation could digress, lunch had ended and the others started getting up to go outside with their families.

... --- ...

About an hour before the third task was scheduled to start, Rufus Scrimgeour found Harry in McGonagall's classroom. The teen was sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, in silence, holding hands with Amelia's niece.

The old Auror had made a career of training young Aurors to go into unknown situations, do their jobs, and to go home again at the end of their shifts. The few that he'd lost over the years allowed themselves to get into situations that were way over their heads and then tried getting out of them by acting the hero, without possessing the skills to back up their actions. He hoped that the Potter boy wouldn't fall into that trap. He greeted the two teens, "Harry, Susan."

"Rufus."

"Mr. Scrimgeour."

Susan kissed Harry and whispered, "I'll be waiting for you. I love you."

Harry looked into her eyes, nodded and whispered, "I'll come back. I love you too."

She left the room and Scrimgeour put down the pail filled with iced butterbeers that he always brought with him.

He had Harry stretch for ten minutes and went through another equipment check with the teen. Satisfied that he had everything that he needed, Scrimgeour handed Harry a butterbeer and they sat down

together. He looked in the teen's eyes and saw a quiet determination, then said, "The minute that you set foot in the maze, you've met your so-called magical obligation. You could walk right out if you wanted to."

"I know."

"But you won't, will you?"

"No, sir."

"Scrimgeour gave a slight snort and remarked, "I didn't think so." He took a sip of the syrupy beverage and added, "So go in there. Play to survive. Win if you can, but keep the two priorities straight."

"Yes, Sir."

They finished their butterbeers and Scrimgeour related stories from various Auror operations that he'd participated in over the years – arrests, domestics, Death Eater raids, shoplifting cases and the like. The two had forged an unlikely friendship over the months and they were both better off because of it. Harry had acquired much better skills and Scrimgeour had reacquired some of his rather humble roots.

Too soon, it was time to go. They walked out of the classroom and down the stairways and winding hallways to get to the front door where they met Minerva McGonagall. She held her emotions in as best as she could and admitted, "You've made me very proud of you, Potter. Godspeed."

Harry felt the lump in his throat and realized that he wouldn't be able to say anything. Instead, he reached out to hug his professor.

McGonagall needed no encouragement and threw her arms around the teen that had come to mean so much to her. She was surprised, but didn't say anything when she felt his dragonhide armor. A moment later, they broke apart and she gave him a little smile and a wink and in a soft voice, added, "Good luck, Harry."

He nodded to her, still not trusting his voice.

With a tear running down her cheek, she watched as the old Auror and the young teen walked down the path to the quidditch field, and made a silent prayer that he would escape unscathed.

... --- ...

While Scrimgeour was giving Harry his pep talk, Amos Diggory was attempting to do the same with his son. However, his message varied somewhat from the one that Potter had just received. "Cedric, you're this close..." The man stood in front of his son with his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "This close to winning. The little Potter boy has a twenty-second head start on the three of you. That's one wrong turn. You can make that up in the first minute. My advice is to keep going left when you need to make a choice. Run as fast as you can and you'll simply pass by most of the obstacles. You've beaten Potter on your broom; you can beat him in the maze. Win, and you'll have something that you can hold up for the rest of your life."

With a completely impassioned voice he added, "You can do it, Son." The over-enthused parent gave his son a hug and practically pleaded, "Go out and win."

The good-looking teen nodded at his father's words – encouraged at the confidence that his father had shown in him. He replied, "I can do it."

The hyper-charged dad gave his son a hug and replied, "I know you can, Son. I'll see you later."

"Okay, Dad," and with that, Amos Diggory went up to the stands to sit with his friend, Arthur Weasley and the tall Hufflepuff walked to the front of the maze where Ludo Bagman stood.

... --- ...

Rufus looked up into the stands after wishing Harry luck and saw Amelia, Connie and Anna sitting together. He made his way up and sat by them. Amelia looked at him as Connie inquired, "Is he ready?"

Scrimgeour replied, "He's as prepared as we know how to make him. He'll get through the maze in one piece."

Amelia gave him a grateful look as he commented, "He has all of his equipment and he knows what to do. Let's sit back and watch it happen."

She looked down at the four teens standing by Bagman and allowed her eyes to wander around the enlarged Quidditch stands. Lucius Malfoy was seated by Fudge, who was talking to Dumbledore, who was trying to talk with Florean Fortescue. The Beauxbatons students were all sitting together, wearing their sky blue satin robes. The smaller contingent from Durmstrang sat together, although Headmaster Karkarov was nowhere to be seen. She spotted Moody walking around the edge of the thick hedge, obviously looking inward.

As Connie and Rufus chatted away, Amelia looked to the other side of the stands, where she saw Susie and Hermione Granger sitting together, holding hands. She wondered to herself if the dentists had made a decision regarding their daughter's future education plans.

A few minutes later she noticed Moody take one last look at the hedge and limp back into the castle.

Just then, Bagman began his announcement, and a minute later, the first whistle blew and Harry ran into the maze.

... --- ...

Harry ran as fast as he could into the maze as it did a quick U-turn, came back and did another U turn, this time it went a bit farther. He got to the first three-way intersection and stabbed his wand into the hedge scratching his hand as he did. As he heard the second whistle blow, the hedge opened up just enough to allow him to pass. As he climbed through, the third whistle blew and as the hedge closed behind him, he knew that all of the Champions had entered the maze.

He followed the directions that Scrimgeour had given him and within five minutes had worked his way well into the maze.

... --- ...

Whereas Potter went straight through the hidden archway in the thorny hedge, and Fleur and Cedric turned left at the first intersection, Peter Krum decided to go right. Following the example that the tall Hufflepuff and the French girl had shown, Krum ran as fast as he could.

The young Bulgarian was astounded when he slammed into the eight-foot grey crawfish looking creature. When it grabbed his hand with its left pincer claw, the pain was indescribable to the studious fifteen-year-old teen.

Too frightened to even scream properly, he attempted to put up red sparks, as he'd been instructed, as the skrewt severed his four fingers. Shock began to set in as the boy lay bleeding on the ground, his wand crushed by the skrewt. The hideous creature gave a fire blast that badly burned the boy's face as it blasted away. It was a good thing that Hagrid had had the foresight to feed the skrewts before the task started.

... --- ...

Amelia felt her heart skip a beat when Connie shouted, "Good Lord, someone's in trouble. There's the red sparks distress signal!"

Anna held her back as Rufus mentioned, "They're from the right side of the Quidditch pitch. Must have been those skrewts." His comment was meant to calm her, but it wasn't working.

Amelia shook her head. Leading people into dangerous situations was bad enough. She was good at that. Being a parent and watching your child go into life-or-death situations was a hundred times more stressful.

As Bagman and a mediwitch ran into the maze to go fetch the fallen contestant, she blew out a breath and wished that she'd brought her own flask with her.

... --- ...

In the gathering darkness, Harry allowed himself to be distracted by the distress sparks that flashed when Peter had been attacked by the Blast-Ended Skrewt. He'd never understood why Hagrid couldn't go out and buy a Shih-Tzu puppy and be done with it. Susan and Hannah were right – he did have a monster fixation.

Finally he reached the Sphinx. She was beautiful and deadly. He could best describe her as a giant lion. When she saw him approach she said, "The center of the maze is near. To pass, you must answer my question. If you answer it correctly, you may pass by me unharmed. If you answer incorrectly, I'm forced to attack you. If you don't know the answer to my question, you may turn around and come back later. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"What year was Nicolas Flamel born?"

Harry didn't have a clue. If Binns had spent time going on about anything rather than goblin rebellions, he might have known the information. He replied, "I'll be leaving now." He went back the way that he came, until he was out of sight. He counted to ten and walked back to the sphinx.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"What year was Hogwarts founded?"

"I'll be back later."

... --- ...

Cedric and Fleur worked their way through the maze together. They helped each other when they ran into the cloud of confounding gas

and found themselves walking back towards the entrance. After they made their way through it a second time they ran into a three-way intersection. Fleur said, "I zink I shall go towards the right zis time, e tu?"

Recalling his father's advice, Cedric replied, "I shall go left. Good luck to you."

Despite the burn on her face, she still was a very attractive woman. She smiled at him and said, "Bon chance to you, too."

A moment later, they parted ways.

... --- ...

"Are you ready for your question?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes."

"Who won The Open last summer?"

A smile crept onto Harry's face. He'd overheard Hermione's dad talking to Mr. Weasley about golf. Hoping that he was right and not daring to believe that he'd get an easier question next time, he replied, "Tom Watson, by one stroke."

The sphinx replied, "After seven questions, you have found your answer. You may pass." She gracefully got up and unblocked the path.

Harry ran past the sphinx and followed the winding hedge until he came to an intersection. Looking right, he saw more hedges. Looking left, he saw the cup!

Harry turned left and dashed the length of the Quidditch pitch towards the cup. He noticed that Cedric appeared around the corner and was a pace or two behind him.

Harry ran flat-out and had nearly reached the cup when he tripped on a thick strand of silk that had stretched across the pathway about knee high. He was stuck to it.

Cedric jumped over the silk cord like a high hurdler and was twenty feet from the cup when he was grabbed by the shoulder and lifted off of his feet by the largest acromantula that Harry had ever seen.

AAARRRGGGG

Harry could hear Cedric's scream as the younger teen cast Diffindo on the silk, cutting the strand and freeing himself. He got up, took careful aim and cast Diffindo at the spider, severing the pincer that was holding the Hufflepuff Champion.

Enraged by the attack, the giant spider hurled itself towards Harry.

"Reducto."

"Reducto."

Sizzle.

Boom!

The spider exploded under the force of Diggory's exploding hex, while Harry's had missed the spider's head by fractions of an inch.

"Thanks," remarked Harry. "I'd have been a goner if that thing had reached me."

"Yuck!"

... --- ...

Fleur had gotten herself hopelessly lost in the maze when she heard the Reducto blast from the other Champions. She had nearly reached the Devil's Snare and hadn't noticed the thick vine slithering along the ground up towards her midsection.



Just as the insidious vine was ready to encircle and consume her, she realized her mistake, turned herself around and began running in the correct direction.

... --- ...

Cedric and Harry looked at each other, then at the remains of the disgusting hairy creature that had so nearly ended both of their lives. Diggory commented, "Merlin, Hermione told me that Hagrid keeps these things as pets. What is wrong with him?"

Harry could only shake his head in wonderment.

Cedric surprised Harry by suggesting, "We both got through this. Let's tie for it. That would still be a Hogwarts victory and we could get out of here."

Harry replied, "Are you sure? You're the real Hogwarts Champion and honestly, it doesn't mean that much to me."

Cedric replied, "Maybe not now, but it's something that you earned too, and someday it might. Come on, let's go."

They grabbed the cup at the same instant. Harry was slightly surprised to feel the now familiar sensation of the portkey grabbing him.

As they flew from the maze in a blue flash, Cedric heard Harry mutter, "Damn it."

... --- ...

From the top of the Quidditch stands it had been possible to use the elevation to see a bird's eye view of the maze. At first it had been easy to see the champions in their different colored robes as they worked their way through the maze. However, the stands were not high enough to allow the spectators to see anything but the tops of the Champions heads as they entered the inside third of the maze.

As the daylight gave way to the evening, Amelia saw a flash in the center of the maze. Rufus asked, "Was there supposed to be a photographer stationed at the center of the maze?"

Connie replied, "That was a portkey flash. It had a blue tint to it."

Amelia jumped up and demanded, "Let's go!" She ran down the stairs of the grandstand amazingly quickly with the other three following right behind.

As she reached the bottom, she found Fudge in a friendly chat with the Headmaster and called, "Professor, your tournament has gone pear shaped! There was a portkey flash in the center of the maze!"

Not waiting for the kindly old mage to refute her, she pulled her cell phone and pressed one of the numbers that she had on speed-dial.

Five hundred miles away, Kingsley was sitting in the ready room when he heard his new cell phone ring. Amelia asked, "How many Aurors are available within one minute?"

"Six."

"Send four, including yourself to the school. Bring battle gear. Go!"

Turning to the headmaster she called, "Dumbledore, get everyone into the Great Hall within five minutes. No exceptions. Move."

... --- ...

Junior watched the progress of the tournament through the maze using Moody's magical eye. Inexplicably Potter allowed the Diggory teen to take the cup at the same time, and in a flash, they both disappeared. As his Polyjuice potion was about to wear out, he quickly started walking back to the castle. As he was working his way around the outer hedge, he saw Bones and the three uniformed Aurors that were with her rushing down the stands. Not wanting to confront them, he quickly made his way into the castle.

... ---

Dumbledore placed his wand to his throat and called, "Sonorus. Can I have your attention? I would like all students and staff members to go back to the castle as soon as possible and wait quietly at your table in the Great Hall. Heads of house, count your students and be ready to report anyone missing within five minutes."

... --- ...

Amelia followed by Rufus, Connie, Anna and a sputtering Fudge went into the maze as she blasted their way into the center. Fudge shouted, "I'll have your job for this disruption, Amelia. You can't go and create a disruption of the magnitude. You've ruined the tournament. What will the papers say?"

Completely ignoring the little man's whining, Bones pressed on.

As they reached the center, Connie wasn't surprised to find it empty. She cast a detection spell and to no one's surprise announced, "There was the magical trace that a portkey has recently been used in the area."

Puce faced, Fudge blustered, "What are you talking about. What's the meaning of this?"

Just then, Fleur came into the center and inquired, "Am I zee winner?"

Connie shook her head, pointed her to the path that they had blasted their way to get here and replied, "Go back to the castle, Miss Delacour."

... --- ...

When Junior got into his room, he took his last sip of the good potion and filled his flask with the ruined Polyjuice. It wasn't what he wanted, but it could be used to carry on his deception a while longer if he needed to.

In the mean time, he sat and waited.

... --- ...

Moments before, Amos Diggory was having the time of his life watching the event with his friend, Arthur Weasley. Diggory bragged, "I'm certain that my Cedric will emerge as the Triwizard victor.

Arthur nodded, but didn't say anything. Naturally he was conflicted between rooting for his friend's son and cheering for Harry. He watched with a hollow pit in his stomach as he noticed Amelia, Scrimgeour and the two investigative Aurors race down the stands.

Amos had a feeling of dread, as if he'd been kicked in the stomach as Dumbledore made his announcement and the four DMLE officials blasted their way into the maze. He called, "Come on, Arthur. We need to go see what's wrong."

... --- ...

Susan was incredibly conflicted as she made her way back into the castle. She was scared beyond belief and wanted to run to her Auntie to find out what happened. Yet her instructions had been perfectly clear. She held Hermione's hand and whimpered, "What could have gone wrong?"

Unfortunately, the brown haired witch could think of dozens of things.

... --- ...

The old scribe had coached his new apprentice on the upcoming meeting. The apprentice looked at his notes one last time before walking into the castle. Don't call her an old crone or a bint to her face, try not to mention any brand names, and leave at least a pint of liquor out for her. Whatever you do, don't mention who dies in the next chapter.

Crow allowed the grey hunter to walk in first. McGonagall offered her greeting, "Good afternoon, Mr. Cro... You're not Crow. What are you doing back at school? You were expelled!"

Crow shook his head, as he was watching the scene unfold from just outside the door, while engaged in a lively conversation with another skilled storyteller. Her perspective was that every reader should leave at least a five to ten word response per report, which typically represented ten – twenty hours of work. It made sense to the old scribe, but he typically left a calling card when he read reports. He put down her report and noted the number, 3930276. She'd had some others that he wanted to see, but his attention was turned back to McGonagall's rant.

Somehow the hunter had dropped another report that they'd previously looked at, 3137306 Bearings and drank the pint that he was supposed to have left the transfiguration legend. Suddenly there was a gobbling noise and a grey turkey ran out the door as fast as it could go.

The old scribe shook his head and went out to visit his steel horse. He hoped his fellow scribes would enjoy their own turkeys.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Lightning Strikes

... --- ...

Tom Riddle and Peter Pettigrew sat patiently waiting for a Portkey that might or might not arrive. Barty had no way of communicating his success or lack of it. The third task was scheduled to start at six PM and was expected to take between twenty minutes and an hour to complete.

They didn't know who, if anyone, would be coming, though Barty had assured them that Potter would be the most likely winner.

So they waited.

At 6:20, they saw the Portkey flash at the spot where Barty had been instructed to use as the destination point.

... --- ...

Cedric and Harry felt their feet slam into the ground. Diggory's injured shoulder was throbbing, and as they fell forward; their hands let go of the Triwizard Cup. He raised his head and asked, "Where are we?"

Harry shook his head. He got up, helped Cedric to his feet, and they looked around. They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obviously traveled miles - perhaps hundreds of miles - for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. Instead, they were standing in a dark and overgrown graveyard. The black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

Cedric looked down at the Triwizard Cup and then up at Harry. "Did anyone tell you the cup was a Portkey?" he asked.

"Nope," replied Harry. He was looking around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. Suddenly he recognized the area from the pensive memory that Professor Dumbledore had shown them. A hundred yards in front of them was the largest cauldron that either of them had ever seen. A small fire was heating it.

Cedric asked, "Wands out, d'you reckon?"

"Yeah," replied Harry, glad that Cedric had made the suggestion rather than him.

They pulled out their wands. Harry kept looking around him. He had the strange feeling that they were being watched.

... --- ...

Riddle was positioned about fifty feet to the west of the Portkey landing site and was hidden behind a small bush. Wormtail was a hundred feet up the hill, hidden behind a tree. He looked at his master, who indicated that he would take out Potter, leaving the taller boy for Peter. Riddle held up three little fingers, then two, then one, and then fired, "Stupefy."

Pettigrew had previously been instructed that if anyone other than Potter appeared, that they were to be killed. Thus he fired, "Avada Kedavra."

Riddle's spell hit Potter square in the chest and was substantially absorbed by the Ironbelly armor. Wormtail's jet of green light flashed fractions of an inch to the left of Diggory.

"Down!" yelled Harry, and both teens dove to the ground and rolled. He added, "It's Wormtail!" Cedric grabbed the cup to use for cover just as Pettigrew hit him in the gut with a well-aimed Reducto blast. Potter couldn't find the second attacker, but fired a sweeping Diffindo at Pettigrew, who lost a hand before Harry was hit in the face with an equally well-aimed stunner from Riddle.

The Portkey fired in a blue flash and Cedric disappeared.

Harry was in deep weeds and he was all alone.

... --- ...

Amelia and the others were startled by the blue flash and thump immediately behind them. Whipping her wand out as she spun around, she turned to see the bloody form of Cedric Diggory sprawled on the ground holding the crystal Triwizard trophy. Scrimgeour immediately bent over the teen and examined him. His intestines were blown apart and blood was gushing from the open wound. It didn't look good.

Amelia bent down, her face barely an inch from Cedric's nose and shouted, "Where's Harry?"

The once handsome teen wheezed, "Graveyard... Wormtail... Cauldron... Big Cauldron... Worm... tail... har...ry..." He gave a slight cough, but there was no more air in his lungs to expel.

Fudge yelled, "Healer! We need a healer." He turned to set the trophy rightside up, but Amelia snapped out of the thought that she'd been thinking and shouted, "Don't touch that!!! Anna, call the Unspeakables. We need to know where that Portkey was fired from. Connie, clear the immediate area." Pointing to Fudge she added, "That includes him. Now."

Fortunately, after the second task, Amelia had insisted that a full compliment of healers was onsite for the third task. It looked very grim for the Diggory boy, but he wasn't dead yet.

As the healers began working, Rufus remarked, "I'll go find Amos."

On the other side of the hedges, Amelia could hear the elder Diggory wail, "Where's my boy? Where's Cedric?"

Still standing by the edge of the maze, Dumbledore felt a blinding pain just above his right eye. He allowed himself to be led to a chair. It wasn't the first time he'd felt such pain recently, yet this time somehow felt more severe. He gave Poppy a meaningful look and allowed himself to be helped back to his office.



... --- ...

The headcount illustrated that no students except Cedric and Harry were missing. Outside, approximately four hundred parents, spectators and ministry officials were milling around the grounds of the castle. Minerva sent the students to their common rooms with the sternest possible words warning that any violations would be dealt with severely.

Fudge attempted to send all of the parents and spectators home. He used the strongest possible words to the reporters from the Daily Prophet that there was to be no premature speculation about what had happened and that he would issue an official announcement at nine PM. He also stated that violators to the news blackout would be excluded from further interviews and their publications blocked from sale at the Ministry newsstand.

Not giving a rat's arse what Fudge thought, Xenophilius Lovegood somehow managed to obtain a gruesome photo from a student in Luna's year of Rufus and Amelia tending to the mortally wounded Cedric Diggory. It was a photo that would help change the wizarding world.

... --- ...

Harry awoke some ten minutes after being stunned to find himself tied to a gravestone with heavy cords. He saw Pettigrew over by the cauldron adding fuel to the fire beneath it. Another bonfire had been started nearby. In the gathering darkness, Harry could see his wand on the ground some fifty feet away from him.

Pettigrew walked over to the headstone next to Harry. He could read the name on the marker. It read Thomas Riddle. Harry noticed that the traitor had wrapped his belt around the stump of his left forearm and that the hand was missing.

Pettigrew called, "Accio Thomas Riddle bone fragments."

Harry watched as a cloud of fine grey dust emerged from the ground and settled into a large cup that Pettigrew had set on the grass by his feet. Harry squirmed in a futile attempt to loosen the ropes that were binding him; holding him to the cold, moss-covered headstone.

"Bone of the Father – unknowingly given." Pettigrew dumped the cup of fragments into the cauldron as white sparks flew from the shimmering liquid flew into the air.

From an unseen spot on the other side of the cauldron, Harry could hear a high-pitched voice shout, "Hurry. Hurry."

Pettigrew picked up and dropped his severed hand into the pot and chanted, "Flesh of a servant – willingly given." Yellow sparks flew higher into the air. The bleeding man returned to the frightened teen and awkwardly withdrew a silver ritual knife from his pocket. Suddenly, clarity came to Harry Potter. He was going to be sacrificed for this Hellish ritual to somehow resurrect Voldemort.

"Hold out your arm, Potter."

"No."

"Hold it out, or I'll cut it off. It doesn't matter to me anymore"

"I can't move it. The cords are too tight."

Pettigrew loosened the ropes slightly and roughly grabbed Harry's arm. He slit the inside skin, by Harry's elbow. Moments later a small flow of blood dribbled down Harry's arm and filled the groove in the knife. Pettigrew carefully walked over to the pot and poured the collected blood into the cauldron. Then he chanted, "Blood of the enemy – forcibly taken. Bone, flesh and blood shall be used to restore a true body to my Master. Combined with his spirit, he shall rise before me, and I shall serve him faithfully." A shower of red sparks filled the air.

Pettigrew awkwardly picked up the ugly little creature, which clung to his good arm. He used the stump of his good arm to support the creature, but ended up getting blood all over him. When it was

suspended over the pot, it let go and with a splash, plopped into the sparkling liquid. Sparks of all colors flew into the air.

Minutes passed in silence. As blood continued to ooze down his arm, Harry kept muttering to himself, "Let it drown. Let it drown."

After ten minutes, the sparks flew into the air at an ever-increasing rate until the remaining liquid in the cauldron suddenly flew high into the air and ignited with a Whoosh!!!

Harry had a fleeting thought of Neville and his exploding cauldrons and prayed that Pettigrew had somehow screwed up. Unfortunately, it wasn't to be.

A hand emerged from the cauldron and gripped the edge. A moment later, another hand gripped the opposite side and a skeletally thin figure slowly emerged from the cauldron and stood. In the firelight, Harry could see that the creature was hairless and had snakelike facial features. The creature sniffed the air, turned his head to Pettigrew, took a breath and commanded, "Robe me."

Wormtail awkwardly lifted a robe over the creature and called, "Master."

Lord Voldemort had returned.

He carefully stepped out of the cauldron and called, "My wand, Wormtail."

The whimpering man handed Voldemort his wand, handle first, then knelt and kissed the hem of his master's robes.

"Hold out your arm, Wormtail. Your other arm." He jabbed his wand tip at the now fully defined Mark on Pettigrew's arm. As he touched the tip of his wand to Pettigrew's skin, the Mark immediately went completely black, like wet coal.

Pettigrew whimpered, and waited.

A hundred yards away, an exhausted and terrified teen muttered, "Oh shite."

... --- ...

Lucius Malfoy left Hogwarts when the other parents were asked to leave. As he entered his mansion in Wiltshire, he felt his arm twitch. As he stepped inside the door, he rolled up his sleeve and his worst fear was realized. The Mark on his arm had completely returned. Within a minute, he felt the Mark on his arm burn, and he felt the calling.

The moment hadn't come as a surprise. He would answer the Dark Lord's call and see for himself who or what awaited him.

... --- ...

Hundreds of miles away, Igor Karkaroff felt the Mark on his arm burn. Like Lucius Malfoy, the Durmstrang Headmaster had anticipated that this moment would come, and had made his plans. Wordlessly, he walked up the gangway on the old, sail-less, three-mast ship. Two minutes later, he sealed the last hatch and moments later the ancient ship disappeared beneath the waters – destination Perth.

... --- ...

Peter Crabbe and Grant Goyle hadn't received invitations from the Minister of Magic to attend the final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Neither wealthy and well connected, nor highly skilled – the best days of their lives had been while they were in service to the Dark Lord. Goyle was eating chicken dinner with Crabbe when they felt the Mark burn.

As stupid smiles crept onto the men's faces, they walked outside and happily answered their master's call.

Others in similar situations like the Carrows, Yaxley, the Flints, Bulstrode, the Parkinsons and a score of others felt the miraculous calling from the one who they had feared to be long gone. They

dropped whatever they were doing, grabbed or conjured their garb and answered their master's call.

... --- ...

Back at Hogwarts, Junior waited patiently in his quarters at the castle. As the minutes passed, he dared to dream about leaving the castle later in the evening, and looked around the room. He had no real possessions of his own. In his own form, he gathered his bag of galleons and waited.

Finally, the Mark on his arm materialized – as if it were a photograph in a darkroom-developing tank. Junior dumped some food in the bottom of the trunk and threw the wooden leg and magical eye into one of the other compartments of Moody's trunk. He doubted that he would need to return to the castle, but didn't want to shut the door on that option.

Certain that he and Snape would soon be apprehended and questioned, he made the decision to walk out of the castle in his own form – masked by a hood and the overall confusion of the moment. He grabbed his wand, and without thinking, tucked Moody's flask into the half-ripped pocket of Moody's old traveling duster. He closed the door, and in a fast walk, made his way out of the castle.

... --- ...

Nymphadora Tonks had witnessed the mass-confusion following the abrupt conclusion of the third task. After the headcount was performed in the Great Hall, the non-heads of house staff was dismissed to either go back to their quarters or help outside. She had seen Moody going back to his room, wearing his slate grey duster that he always wore. After the roll call, she went outside, still in her Susan Florman persona/form.

Ten minutes later, she was talking with one of the Ministry workers when she noticed a blonde hair man walking out the door at a rapid pace. She went back to talking to the ministry man when, a half

minute later, the realization had hit her – the man walking out of the castle was wearing Moody's duster.

She started after the man in a dead run and shouted, "Stop! Ministry Auror. Stop now."

From two hundred yards away, Kingsley Shacklebolt heard the disturbance and saw the young woman chasing the other man, who had now broken into a sprint of his own.

Crouch knew that he had to make it past Hagrid's hut to reach the edge of the anti-apparation borders and that was at least a half-mile away. He began running as fast as he could, and never noticed that the silver flask had slipped from his ripped pocket.

Kingsley fired a stunner, but the distance was too great and he missed. He took up the chase, but he was too far away to have any real chance of catching the man.

Tonks took a different approach and was attempting to catch and tackle the fleeing man.

Unfortunately, Barty Junior had been coached much better than the Junior Auror regarding the exact location of the ward boundaries. Crouch knew how far that he had to get, and as he reached the far edge of the hut, the winded man concentrated on his destination.

Not more than two strides behind the fleeing suspect, Tonks gave a leap and attempted to execute a flying tackle. To her utter frustration, the suspect vanished and she landed on the ground, finding herself with a face full of Fang dung.

"Shite."

... --- ...

Back at the graveyard, the pops of apparitions had slowed and then nearly ceased. Harry wasn't certain how many Death Eaters that

there were, but he remembered Scrimgeour's advice about being observant and counted thirty-two so far.

Finally Voldemort seemed to think that enough had arrived and he began, "Welcome, Death Eaters... Thirteen years – it's been thirteen years since last we met... Yet you answered my call as though it were yesterday."

He paused again and added, "We are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening.

"I smell guilt," he said. "There is a stench of guilt upon the air."

Watching from a distance, Harry took another calming breath, though in fact, he was as frightened as he'd ever been.

... --- ...

Severus Snape, age thirty-six, sat in the silence of his quarters as he contemplated what might have happened. Headmaster Dumbledore had merely informed the school that Cedric Diggory and Potter had somehow gone missing.

Certain that he'd be blamed for something that he had nothing to do with; he contemplated his future. It was possible that he could secure a decent position at Durmstrang, though he'd long admitted to himself that he found no joy in teaching. Perhaps he'd do better in Australia.

Without warning, the Mark on his arm flared jet-black. He felt the Dark Lord's call. With the knowledge that Dumbledore wouldn't be around to smooth the way over for him, he made his decision.

It suddenly became obvious to the unpleasant Potions Master that the Dark Lord or one of his servants had snatched Potter and Diggory. With Dumbledore gone, Snape knew that none would stand against the Dark Lord.

He quickly gathered a dozen vials of his most valuable potions and several sacks of rare ingredients and found his vault key. Convinced that he'd never set foot in the room again, he took one last look around and walked out the door.

As he reached the front door he came by the ailing Headmaster who called, "Severus, don't go!"

He looked into the failing eyes of his mentor and replied, "Goodbye, Headmaster." That said; he walked out the door.

... --- ...

Amelia Bones liked to think that her greatest challenge and best accomplishment was to be a good parent to two active teenagers. That said; she didn't rise to become Britain's top magical cop by being a pansy. Two minutes ago, the pieces began to fit together. Snape and Moody were assigned to place the trophy in the middle of the maze. Dumbledore had reported checking it personally as the two men walked the trophy out the door together.

Tonks and Shacklebolt had just lost a wild footrace with a blonde hair young man who was dressed in Moody's traveling cloak. Diggory's final words indicated that they had been tricked by a plot hatched by Pettigrew, probably Riddle, the unidentified man and Merlin only knew who else. Someone had murdered Cedric Diggory and someone had her Son. She wanted to kick some butt. She wanted...

"Stop that man!"

Severus Snape heard her shout, and knew that he had to leave the grounds immediately. Unfortunately, he was running towards the Healer Trainee and another man that Snape didn't immediately recognize.

... --- ...

It had been seven years since Michael Wood had finished Hogwarts. Having been blessed with quick reflexes, his path within that Auror



corps was clear for him, and four years ago, he had been invited to join the Hit Wizard unit.

Wood had been glad to be invited to come to the castle for the day. It gave him the chance to visit with his former Head of House, Professor Flitwick. Now he was stationed at the edge of the castle grounds. He heard his boss's boss shout and was ready for action.

... --- ...

Snape was running flat-out when he realized that the man standing by Healer Trainee Florman was an Auror of some type. Snape whipped out his wand and a jet of green light flew from the outstretched tip.

In the few seconds that he had until the black haired man would reach his opportunity to apparate, Wood drew his wand, dodged what appeared to be a killing curse, shouted, "Stop," and fired, "Diffindo."

His aim was true.

Severus Snape was cut down at the legs. When his body hit the ground, he literally was in three pieces.

"No!" shouted Bones. "I need him alive!" She reached Snape and the other two as Tonks cauterized the wounds on his left stump, then moments later on his right.

It was too late.

Severus Snape, and any answers that he might have possessed, had bled out into the ground.

Bones pulled up his sleeve and saw the jet black Dark Mark on the man's arm and closed her eyes to think. She was worried sick about her son, but there were a million things to do.

... --- ...

Ten minutes later, Albus Dumbledore had never felt older in his life. Harry was gone. Amos's boy had returned badly wounded and was near death, and he'd failed Severus. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain like a charley horse in his thigh. He guessed that his femoral artery had burst or developed an aneurysm. Seating at his desk chair, he tried to maintain focus through the near-blinding pain. He made a statement and then withdrew the memory and placed it in one of the many crystal vials that he had in his desk drawer. He had so much to do and so little time remaining. Realizing that his time had grown very short, he withdrew a dozen other memories and carefully placed them into their own vials.

Moments later, his carotid artery burst and the greatest wizard of his age drew his last breath and slumped over onto the desk.

He was alone when he died.

... --- ...

A hundred miles to the north out in the North Atlantic, a thin woman, dressed in a tattered black leather bustier, who may have been quite beautiful in years past, was awoken from her slumber. She saw the Mark on her arm go dark, then burn in its calling.

She gave a screech of delight that sent a chill to her human guards.

... --- ...

Voldemort walked inside the circle of assembled Death Eaters that surrounded him. Though they were masked in their bone white masks, he called each of them by name. The last one to arrive was Crouch, who along with Pettigrew were named as his "most faithful;" servants. He continued, "As for the rest of you... for thirteen years, I was waiting... waiting for one of you to seek out and find me... Few of you gave even a passing look... Few of you made any attempt... Instead, you lived your comfortable lives – for some of you, very comfortable lives."

Nagini could literally taste the fear in the air. She would enjoy telling her master about the one with the long silver hair.

"Yet none of you attempted to secure the release of your fellow Death Eaters. Bellatrix, Augustus, Rabastan, Rodolphus and others languished in Azkaban, while some of you thought only of lining your pockets and drinking single-malt whiskey..."

He shouted, "That ends now!!!"

Voldemort allowed the silence to build around the circle. Like most inspirational leaders, he had always been a highly skilled speaker. Right now, the pauses between phrases were intended to intimidate his followers, and to a man, it was working. Nagini rose up like a cobra and was eye to eye with Nott for nearly a minute before slithering across the circle.

As the fear mounted, Voldemort broke the silence by observing, "Few of you have maintained your skills... Bulstrode, what happened to your leg?"

Sweating profusely, in spite of the chill in the air, the obviously overweight Michael Bulstrode shook as he replied, "I was injured in your service, Master."

"In my service? You paraded around like a bunch of drunken pirates last summer and were beaten – beaten by a boy. You disgust me. Avada Kedavra." Like a fast gun artist, Voldemort's wand emerged from his pocket, a jet of green light struck Bulstrode, and his wand was back in his pocket before the now dead man had slumped to the ground.

Nott, who was standing next to Bulstrode knelt down and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes and asked, "Master, I beg of you. Please tell us of your miracle."

His desire to intimidate had succeeded. Riddle knew that at this point, they would all fall into line and follow his every command. Lightening the tone, he replied, "Stephen, it was an interesting tale and I will

allow you to hear it, but first I believe Leonard Yaxley has something to say."

Yaxley was preparing for his own death, having lost his leg in the same attack as Bulstrode. He vowed, "I will do better next time, Master. If you would allow me the honor, I will take my vengeance on the Potter brat."

"Crucio." Voldemort held the curse for five seconds and smoothly returned his wand to his pocket.

"Allow?... the Dark Lord does not grant three wishes like some jinni in a bottle."

"Allow?... The dark Lord will take what he wishes, and you who are barely worthy will provide me what I need. I will, however allow you to live. Crucio." After a few seconds, he let up on the curse.

He told them his tale in some detail, but never used or mentioned the term horcrux. For nearly an hour he told them of his survival, his exile in Albania, of being found by Pettigrew, their chance meeting with Bertha Jorkins, of freeing Barty Crouch and of their plan to trap Harry Potter.

... --- ...

As Bulstrode was falling to the ground, Broderick Brode and Head Unspeakable Alejandro Croaker arrived at Hogwarts. Croaker got right to work examining the trophy, while Amelia questioned Brode. "How long will it take to find the original destination?"

Unspeakables weren't as a rule field-agents, and were rarely used to being rushed. Seeing the urgency on Director Bones' face, Brode optimistically replied, "Perhaps as quick as an hour."

Bones exclaimed, "An hour? Harry Potter doesn't have an hour." Hoping that her son was still engaged in a firefight, she added, "This could be over in five minutes. We need an answer now and we need a rapid response team ready to go in three minutes."

"I'll volunteer," announced, Michael Wood.

"Me too," added his sister Michelle, also a Hit Witch

"Aye," said, Connie.

"I'll go," added Shacklebolt."

"Us too," remarked two of the trainee Aurors, Gunner Fawcett and Michael Bradley, hoping that they would finally be allowed to get some action in.

"We will too," announced the two Unspeakables who had accompanied Brode and Croakers.

Amelia was conflicted. Sending good people into what was most likely Lord Voldemort's lair sounded like pointing the way to their deaths, but her son needed help.

At the moment, it was moot. Croaker had taken the challenge to unravel the Portkey personally, but didn't yet have a solution. What made it difficult to understand was the two-way aspect of the cup. After ten minutes of methodical study, he announced, "The Portkey charm was cast today, but you probably already knew that." He added a masking rune and a few minutes later removed it and applied it to the other side of the cup. This seemed more to his liking. Finally he announced, "I've got it."

She replied, "Alejandro, please make a six foot chain Portkey. We'll leave in one minute."

... --- ...

As Fudge was attempting to console the Diggorys, one of the Junior Aurors came up and exclaimed, "Minister, they found the Dark Mark on the body of Severus Snape. It was completely black!"

Diggory grabbed onto that and demanded, "Cornelius, does that mean that You-Know-Who is...? Did he attack my... my boy?"

Fudge smoothly replied, "No... No Amos. I'm sure there's some other explanation." His thoughts drifted back to the disappearance of You-Know-Who's wand, Lucius's attempt to divert the Aurors at the World Cup, the appearance of long hidden Death Eaters, the Dark Mark, and Potters insistence that he'd seen Pettigrew and that the supposedly long-dead young man was in fact, a killer and a Death Eater.

He muttered to himself, "What else can go wrong?"

... --- ...

Lucius looked around the graveyard as the Dark Lord spoke of his time in Albania. There must be some specific reason why they were at this particular spot. He glanced at the headstone next to where the Potter brat was tied up and saw the name – Thomas Riddle. That confirmed the rumor that had been spread by the Daily Prophet. He got Stephen's attention and gave a pointed look in Potter's direction.

Nott saw the marker too and like his aristocratic friend Lucius, came to the same conclusion – for all of his might and skill, the ruler of the pureblood society. Tom Riddle was nothing more than a half-blood passing himself off as one of them. Within hours, he knew that they would be asked to fund him like some patron of old.

... --- ...

"And so my tale begins, and ends with Harry Potter." As he spoke, Voldemort's snake Nagini raised her head from time to time, sniffed the air and flicked her forked tongue at the meal that had been laid out in front of her.

"Since you have provided me the means to return to my own body, I will offer you the opportunity to duel Lord Voldemort – to die by my hand with dignity like your father did. You have been taught to duel Harry Potter?"

Not trusting his voice, Harry nodded.

"Wormtail, release him and return his wand to him." Pettigrew, who was still marveling at his new hand walked over to the gravestone that Harry was bound to and vanished the cords.

... --- ...

As the Aurors prepared to mount a rescue mission and the Healers were frantically attempting to save Amos's son, Fudge blew a measured breath. The last thing in the world that he wanted the Aurors to find would be a coven of Death Eaters led by Lucius.

As he watched the Mediwitches transport Cedric to St. Mungo's, his thoughts turned back to the World Cup. It had been easy to fob off the supposed attack as a bunch of drunken sports fans. The theft of You-Know-Who's wand had been easy enough to explain as a bit of vandalism. Diggory returning badly injured or worse would have to be explained as some sort of creature attack from the third task. His mind raced searching for plausible options as the Aurors prepared to depart.

... --- ...

Encircled by the Death Eaters, Harry had nowhere to run. He stood some forty feet from Voldemort, moving back as far as he could. "Bow to death, Harry Potter, then when Wormtail says go, we duel."

Having seen Riddle's lightening quick reflexes, Harry realized that he was hopelessly outclassed. Yet, in that moment, he thought of his mother and father, of Amelia, of Hermione and finally of Susan. It was at that point that he found his courage. He found his strength.

"Go."

"Reducto."

"Reducto."

Harry rolled to the right as he fired and accidentally hit Yaxley in the gut instead of Riddle. However, Tom's aim was true, and Harry's

wand exploded into dozens of pieces. With a fancy move, Lord Voldemort put his wand back in his pocket and turned around to face his servants, leaving Harry standing there, awaiting the death stroke which would doubtless fall before the night was through. Except for Yaxley, who was drawing his last breath, they were laughing and applauding when the Dark Lord gave a little stage bow.

The mood considerably lightened, one by one, he walked up to each Death Eater and asked them a question or two. Somehow he seemed to already know the answers. For the most part, the Death Eaters groveled and each seemed to make an excuse or two. The Dark Lord seemed to be in a forgiving mood.

Flint had been standing by Yaxley and was trying to help him, but blood was spraying over the nearby headstones.

Taking a deep breath, Harry saw his chance – his one chance and took it. Pulling his spare wand from its holster, he whispered, "Accio Riddle's wand."

Alecto Carrow watched in shock as in the course of three seconds, the Potter boy whipped out another wand, summoned and grabbed the Dark Lord's wand and cast a sweeping cutting charm which hit the Dark Lord, Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle and beheaded Nagini before disappearing.

The last thing Harry saw was Riddle's left hand falling to the ground as he snapped the Popsicle stick and disappeared.

... --- ...

As Amelia was readying herself to go, she heard someone fire the cannon blast charm from the area by Hagrid's hut. A moment later, she heard, Tonks; Sonorus shout of "Potter's back!"

"I'll go, too, announced Anna. I've got my camera kit here in case there's anything to see."

Bones announced, "Rufus, stay here. The team leaves in five minutes unless you hear me call, "No joy." Have a second team



ready to go depending on what we learn from Harry. Everyone comes home. Come back immediately if its bad odds. Good luck."

That said, she ran as fast as she could to where Tonks was stationed. When she finally reached him, he was seated on a stool that the Junior Auror had transfigured. Resuming her parent role, she cried, "Oh Lord, Harry, I was so worried. I'm so happy to see you." She ran up and hugged him for all that he was worth.

The only words out of Harry's mouth were, "He's back."

Forcing herself back into her Auror role, she pulled a crystal vial out of her bag and directed, "Make a memory copy from the moment that you entered the maze until you got back."

Harry touched his spare wand to his head and withdrew a dark grey strand and carefully placed it into the vial and handed it back to her.

He was about to ask what had happened to Cedric, when Fudge ran up and in a winded breath, demanded, "What happened, Potter?"

Amelia shook her head and announced, "He'll tell this one time and one time only. Harry, can you walk?"

His arm that had been cut was throbbing and the adrenalin rush was subsiding, leaving him with a pounding headache, but that aside, he was okay. He replied, "I'm fine."

Amelia said, "Tonks, go get Scrimgeour out of the maze. Tell him to send the troops and meet us in the hospital wing in five minutes. Run."

... --- ...

As they walked down the corridor, Squiggles the elf popped up and in a desperate voice called, Ms. Bones, Ma'am, please comes along. Headmaster Dumbledores... Please comes along, please."

With the utmost reluctance, she allowed herself to be dragged towards Dumbledor's office after announcing, "Harry, I'll be back in

five minutes. Have Healer Pomfrey look you over, but don't say anything or go anywhere until I get back."

McGonagall added, "I'll go with you."

That said, they were rushed to Dumbledore's office by the frantic elf.

... --- ...

As Amelia reluctantly walked with McGonagall and the little elf towards the headmaster's office, Fudge saw his chance. As they walked to the hospital wing he demanded, "What happened, Potter?"

Not thinking that Amelia's warning applied to questions from the Minister of Magic, Harry gave a weary reply, "He's back. Voldemort's back. Pettigrew might have killed Cedric. Lucius Malfoy..."

Fudge snapped. His orderly world was about to crumble and he wasn't going to let this boy topple it.

"Obliviate!"

Potter was hit squarely with the blast and toppled down the stairway from the impact of the hex.

Figuring that his immediate problem was resolved, Fudge quickly left the castle, not knowing what he would do next. Perhaps Delores would have an idea.

... --- ...

Tonks ran to Scrimgeour and described what had happened with Harry's return. "That's all I know, Sir."

Based on a guess that Harry may have caused some injuries, Scrimgeour took quick action. "Tonks, you and Dawlish and Straphand, go to the lobby of St. Mungo's. The Death Eaters have snatched healers before and they're not going to get away with it this time. Wands out. Go!"

The young Auror had the feeling that she was in over her head.

... --- ...

Voldemort shouted, "Damn him. Wormtail." He clamped his hand over his wrist to slow the flow of blood.

The little rat ran up and asked, "Yes, Master?"

Through gritted teeth, Voldemort commanded, "Give me your wand."

Peter pulled out his wand and handed it, handle first, to the Dark Lord, who grabbed it and with great effort, conjured a silver hand. As the liquid silver formed, Pettigrew noticed his Master strain as he attached it to the bleeding stump. Having no idea regarding the effort or skill that such a miracle took, he was amazed as he watched his Master at work.

Meanwhile, Lucius Malfoy cast a healing charm on himself. He was at the tail end of Potter's cutting hex and had been cut deeply in his left leg, but no major arteries had been severed. He would have a limp and be stiff for a while, but he didn't lose his leg. He helped his friend, Stephen Nott as best as he could. Nott had been standing next to Malfoy and had been hit higher up.

Crabbe and Nott had been hit in the gut and would require a skilled healer if they were to stand a chance. Riddle was exhausted, but this was not the time to show it. He got back on his feet and saw Yaxley on the ground, dead, with Goyle about to join him. He cast stasis charms on Goyle and directed Alexis Carrow, "Take Goyle and Nott to your home. Flint, and Parkinson, go obtain services from someone at St. Mungo's. Wear a hood, but no mask and Oblivate her when you're done and let her go."

He knew it was likely that the Potter Boy would return soon and bring back half of the Aurors with him. Damn him. He'd underestimated the boy again, and it had cost him his wand, and some respect from his servants. His moment of glory had been lost. He was in no position to fight the Aurors today and doubted that his servants were either. He

announced, "We'll meet tomorrow night at ten at the Aveberry Circle. Go and prepare yourselves to rejoin my service."

The Death Eaters didn't need to be told twice and quickly disappeared in groups of twos or threes.

Voldemort turned to Pettigrew and Crouch and added, "Well done to both of you. I shall reward both of you beyond your dreams, but this isn't the time. Barty, we shall go and pay your father a visit and then go to Gringotts. There is nothing more for us here, so let us leave." Seconds later, they were in the back garden at the home of Crouch Senior.

...

Michael Wood heard a double apparition pop a moment after he and the rest of the ministry party arrived at Little Hangleton. He whipped his wand around to strike, only to see that no one was visible. In the gathering darkness there were still two fires illuminating the area. Michael and his sister, Michelle started walking outward while the other four waited as per their procedure. As he signaled, they began moving out in a circle, forming an ever-widening perimeter around their entry point. When they had gone about a hundred feet, he signaled that they stop and they each carefully looked around.

After a minute, Wood was satisfied that the area was deserted and they each cast Lumos Maximus. They could see the headstones.

While the others provided cover, Connie and Anna methodically walked back and forth in straight rows. Along the way, they found two bodies, a hand, several headstones splattered with blood, a Death Eater mask, the remains of a shattered wand and a massive cauldron.

"There's ropes around this one," remarked Connie, not wanting to think about poor Harry.

"More blood and body bits here. This looks like part of a Hufflepuff patch," added Anna, cringing as she realized that she was most likely standing on the spot where Cedric had been hit.

"Here's the handle to the wand," added Connie. Anna came over and took several photos of the wand that was most likely Harry's. She carefully marked the evidence and placed the shattered wand in a bag.

"Connie, Look at this!" Anna pointed to the hand that they'd seen twenty minutes ago. Then it had looked to be newly severed. Now it looked like it was month old road kill. She took another photo before bagging the withered hand.

Connie replied, "We'll have to compare the photos. Finish bagging it. Let's get some photos of the bodies and the blood on these headstones."

A half hour after they had arrived, they closed up the perimeter, and took the Portkey back to the castle.

... --- ...

ooo CCC ooo

As Crow closed the door behind him and stepped into the bitter cold, McGonagall wondered if she shouldn't have invited him to stay for the Christmas holidays, or at least for a pint. The opportunity lost, she examined the report that he'd dropped off. Obviously there had been loss. She glanced up at the portrait that was at least making a pretense of sleeping, though she knew for a fact that the old headmaster never dozed while wearing his glasses. She worried over the fate of the Diggory boy. His prognosis wasn't good, even though there had been no recent report from St. Mungo's.

Yet somehow, there was hope in her heart. She hoped that the next report would clarify what had happened. She also hoped that those who had enjoyed the report would remember to mark it up. Lately Filius had been quite remiss in that respect.

She opened up the Christmas card and the bottle of amber potion that bore the scribe's name. Crow had apparently been studying arithmancy of late, as there was a rather long and involved equation.

There were also several sets of numbers scribbled along the edges –  
2859327\*5402315+5244813\$3675262.

She opened the bottle of potion marked "For medicinal purposes only" and took a dose. It tasted considerably better than the arthritis remedy that Poppy had given her the previous week. As she began rereading the report, she silently wished the old scribe well and hoped that he remembered to wear his gloves in the cold.

... --- ...

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